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Courageous thinking
for individuals
and organisations

The Thinking Board

“What were they thinking?” was the question that came to mind when news of Tesco, Co-op Bank, Kids Company, Beat Bullying and others hit the headlines. Indeed, were the boards thinking well at all?

We all know that it is not as simple as the headlines would have us believe. At the same time, all boards may do well to ask themselves if they are thinking at their best. Are we asking the best and most powerful questions of the executive and the organisation as a whole?

“Everything begins with thinking. If our thinking is good, our decisions are good, our actions are good, our outcomes are good. So what does it take for us to think for ourselves – with rigour, imagination, courage and grace?”

Nancy Kline, President of Time To Think and the Thinking Environment™ .

In 2012, Compass Partnership published “Delivering Effective Governance – Insights from the boards of larger charities”. They summarised key characteristics of effective governance as follows:

- “Structures” – the relatively fixed architecture that supports the other elements of governance
- “Processes” - methods that organisations use to populate their structure, to hold management to account and to review their own performance
- “Meetings” – Compass brought together the characteristics of meetings because their conduct is so central to the delivery of governance
- “Behaviours” – which are concerned with the way people relate to each other and how they contribute to governance.

The last two interest me as a Thinking Environment advocate. For years I have held all meetings this way - whether internal senior management, strategic planning awaydays, collaborative consortia, external working groups and boards.

After years of observation we have come to understand that the most important factor in whether people can think for themselves well is **how they are being treated by the people with them while they are thinking.**

Ten behaviours seem to help the most. Most of us already know most of this – however we don't often do it!

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Attention – the quality of our attention profoundly affects the quality of other people's thinking. Listening with respect and without interruption is key. **Without interruption**, turns out to be hugely important.

We all think more incisively when we know we will not be interrupted – not just get lucky and manage to finish our sentence. The neuroscience is interesting. Apparently interruptions are tantamount to being physically hit. We are flooded with adrenalin and cortisol which are brilliant at helping us to fight, flee or freeze – so our thinking minds cannot work at their best. In fact the Harvard Business Review has published research which proved that “bad” meetings result in a drop in IQ!

Equality - even in a hierarchy people can be equal as thinkers. Treating each other as thinking peers, giving equal turns and attention and keeping agreements and boundaries means everyone can participate.

Use systematic rounds from time-to-time instead of always hoping that open discussion will allow those present to say what they need to without fighting for a turn. In rounds people know when their turn will be, freeing them up to think better.

Ease - ease creates, urgency destroys. Being free from distractions - insistent beeps and buzzes of electronic devices - helps everyone to focus. Paradoxically, when you slow things down, smarter thinking and good decision-making speed up.

Appreciation - reality is not just the bad, it is also the good. Our minds require an awareness of both in order to work at their best, so offer genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities. Appreciation also helps when providing high quality feedback as change takes place more easily in the context of praise.

Encouragement - being “better than” is not necessarily being “good.” Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition reinforces the idea that what we are most interested in, is the best thinking - ideas, solutions, decisions - not “winning”.

Feelings - fear constricts everything, especially thinking. Bad behaviour (cynicism, bullying, politics, absence) usually occurs when fear takes hold.

So create a safe, participative culture where everyone can think for themselves, as themselves and where passionately held views can be expressed appropriately. Allow sufficient emotional release (like a good laugh, or expressing sadness - this isn't therapy though!) to restore good thinking.

Information – we cannot think well if we withhold or deny information. Facing what you have been denying leads to better thinking, so supply the facts and dismantle denial.

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“Let's pretend it's all fine”, when it patently is not, seems tempting when the going gets tough – also we live in hope! Asking good questions, looking at issues squarely, with courage, will result in better governance.

Ensure that everyone is well prepared. We can't think well if we do not have access to the data, insight, expertise and back ground. So agendas, briefings and papers should all be sent and read in advance.

Our minds work best in the presence of a question - consider couching agenda items as questions, rather than statements.

Diversity - the greater the diversity of the group, and the greater the welcoming (not simply tolerating), of diverse points of view, the greater the chance of accurate, cutting-edge thinking. Divergent thinking and diverse group identities, avoids group think too.

Incisive Questions – remove assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively. It is good occasionally to ask “what are we assuming that is stopping us...?” A wellspring of good ideas lies just beneath a limiting assumption and an Incisive Question will remove it, freeing minds to think afresh.

Place - when the physical environment affirms our importance, we think more clearly and boldly. When our bodies are cared for and respected, our thinking improves – create physical environment that says back to people, “You matter”. So where's the best place to meet? If there's no choice, what would make it more conducive to good thinking?

The Compass report lists “good” behaviours, including use of members' skills, listening, team working, praise and challenge, openness and trust, strategic focus and contact outside meetings – all so called “soft” skills, yet often the hardest to put into practice.

The Thinking Environment is a rigorous process and a practical framework which can support boards wishing to think at their best and deliver excellent governance.

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