

Coaching in Practice

In this issue, coach, facilitator and leader **Catherine Michielsens** reflects on the power of the Thinking Environment approach in promoting diversity and inclusion in a corporate environment



Catherine Michielsens

is a certified Thinking Environment coach and facilitator. She graduated as an industrial pharmacist

from the University of Antwerp and has many years of leadership experience within the pharmaceutical industry. Living in Belgium, Catherine currently works for a global pharmaceutical company and leads a team across Europe, Middle East and Africa.

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

Alongside providing training and coaching on the Thinking Environment¹ (TE) to various groups, I use Thinking Environment principles to connect with and build connections within my team. The TE approach embraces difference as a component to enable independent thinking. Welcoming diversity of thought and creating the conditions for people to feel included within teams and communities are key drivers for the creation of strong relationships and partnership. If we create conditions in which people have an equal voice, we give them the opportunity to co-create a future together. When people are able to express their ideas, and think for themselves, this has an impact on their actions, on outcomes and on the relationships within their teams.

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

In 2012, I participated in a women's leadership programme within my company. This programme encouraged me to examine our current volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous (VUCA) world, to consider who I am as a person and as a leader in this world, and to combine these incremental insights to think about my future and who I would

like to be in that future. I had never experienced any kind of training like this before. The connections I made with others on the programme were immediately deep and powerful, from the very first day. At first, I did not understand what made our connections during the programme so tangible. Throughout the programme and through individual coaching, there was something happening that united us as a group, which I experienced as transformational. When I asked the coaches what it was, they confirmed that, not only were they introducing the TE concepts to us, they had been applying those concepts throughout the programme to enable such connection and transformation.

I decided to travel to London and take a Thinking Environment foundation course, and continued with the facilitating and coaching programmes led by Time to Think faculty members. Not only was I convinced this would make me a better leader and person, but I realised I had also found a way to further support the diversity and inclusion vision within my organisation.

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?

I am facilitating and coaching within the company, and I work with individuals and teams around the globe on TE principles, on the impact of being treated as equal and not being interrupted in meetings and how this positively contributes to team dynamics within the working environment. The managers I worked with realised the benefits when their people were able to express their ideas without interruption, when they were given space to think for themselves, since this was leading to more efficient meetings, more diverse thinking, improved team dynamics and better outcomes. If we agree that human resources are a main competitive advantage to a business, when we realise creating equality and diversity leads to better results, it is worthwhile to create those conditions in our workplaces.

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?

What I love about being a TE coach is that something as 'simple' as listening with superb attention and not interrupting can have such a positive impact on an individual and on a team. The change in energy in the room – even a virtual one – during a session, has a positive effect on me as a coach and I always emerge from the session with new insights. Being a TE coach has also changed me as a leader, raising my awareness of how I can be more inclusive in meetings, for example, and having much more focus and attention.

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?

The increase in digital connection in recent years has had a fundamental advantage in that I can now connect people from around the world in a single session, immediately increasing the diversity within the group.

During one such recent session, in the opening round of introductions, I asked the participants to introduce themselves and share a recent positive event, speaking first in their own native language, and thereafter in our shared common language, English. For some participants, unused to expressing themselves in their own language in a business setting, there was some initial awkwardness and reticence. What I noted though was that the use of native languages helped create connection more quickly among the participants afterwards. Not understanding what is being said forces us to listen to the *sound* of language, rather than jump immediately into interpreting the content of it. For a few moments, it reminded us all of how different we are and how powerful it can be for a team when everyone feels able to bring their whole self into the space.

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?

I highly recommend the latest book from Nancy Kline: *The Promise That Changes Everything: I won't interrupt you* (Penguin, 2020).² If you are interested in training in Thinking Environment coaching, visit: www.timetothink.com/book-a-course For more information, see: www.timetothink.com.

REFERENCES

- 1 Kline N. Time to think: listening to ignite the human mind. London: Penguin; 1999.
- 2 Kline N. The promise that changes everything: I won't interrupt you. London: Penguin; 2020.