

Guidelines for a Thinking Environment

(based on Nancy Kline)

1. Give everyone a turn

Everyone has a turn to speak, several times, knowing they will not be interrupted. Giving everyone a turn increases the intelligence of groups. There may be several 'rounds' during the course of the meeting.

2. Begin with a positive reality (without being gushy).

The mind responds best to a full picture of reality- but our tendency is to start and stay with what is not working. Begin with a first round with a positive reflection on people's work/the project at hand. eg, what's going well in our work/our systems leadership challenge? What successes have you had since we last met?

Then have a second round, starting with the first agenda item. Go round everyone to get their ideas inviting their freshest thinking, but prevent it from going into a discussion. Open discussion comes afterwards. If you begin this way, the chances are quieter people will speak again in the open discussion. Ensure other participants pay attention to catalyse that person's thinking.

This will help increase the number and quality of ideas generated throughout the meeting and allow for more commitment to actions that follow.

3. Let them finish

Interrupting can limit ideas and lead to decisions made on undeveloped fragments of ideas. Agree not to interrupt each other. You will have your turn. You can exchange ideas, disagree but don't interrupt. When people know they will have a turn and be allowed to finish their thought, they tend to think more quickly and say less. When they anticipate interruption, they grasp for edges of ideas, they rush, they elaborate. If you are worried about all of this taking too much time, remember: giving everyone time can save time.

4. Identify assumptions and ask incisive questions

A thinking environment suspends limiting assumptions eg 'if I think for myself and say what I think, it will jeopardise my job' or 'my ideas don't matter, they can't add value to the meeting'. A Thinking environment replaces these limiting assumptions with freeing assumptions, eg 'if you knew that your ideas do matter, if you knew you could value to this meeting, then what would you say?' 'If you knew you were as important as anyone else in this meeting, where your job is best done by contributing your thinking to the meeting, then what would you say?'. NB it helps to add the hypothesis 'if you knew' to the freeing assumption to free up thinking.

Other incisive questions that can help include:

- 'what might we be assuming that could be limiting our thinking here?'
- 'if we assumed something more freeing, what new ideas might we have?'

5. Divide into thinking pairs

When ideas are flagging or when the group needs to challenge limiting assumptions, try this: divide the group into pairs and give each person five minutes to think uninterrupted for themselves with a partner's undivided, respectful attention. This Thinking Partnership can help re-ignite thinking and reenergise the group

6. Go round again

At certain points, do a go round again. You will want to resist doing it, but do it anyway- it can allow for a much needed idea to pop up- which may indeed, save time later.

7. Give permission to tell truth

Create the conditions for everyone to share the truth of the situation, as they see it- what needs to be said without repercussion. This can include being as negative as it needs to be.

8. Allow people's feelings

Feelings are data. If you plough on without recognising them, important insights can be lost. Lack of acknowledgement of any strong feelings can also limit thinking and new ideas. Create space for feelings in a round- or use the 'pause button' where needed to give them space. Ensure there is space to agree how best to handle any burning issues at the end, if they have not been attended to.

9. End with a positive turn

- Reflect positively on the meeting itself

Ask a question like, 'what went well in the meeting,' or 'what did you learn'. Regardless of how difficult the meeting was and regardless of how low spirits of the group might be at the close of business, articulating what was good will remind you of what you share between you- and reignite group energy

-Then Appreciate each other

Ask, 'what is one quality that you respect in the person sitting on your right?' Give everyone a turn, ensure no interrupting, just a 'Thank you'. Some people can go for years, not giving or hearing appreciation or hearing recognition from their peers. People's thinking tends to improve noticeable when they are in the presence of concrete appreciation.

Adapted from 'Time to Think' by Nancy Kline (2006)

Chairing a typical 'Thinking' meeting using 'Thinking Environment' Guidelines

The Opening Round

Chair of the meeting gives everyone a turn to answer positively-focused questions such as:

- What is going well in your work at the moment?
- What do you think we as a team (board, organisation, etc.) are currently doing well?

The Agenda

The Chair confirms the Agenda and identifies the first item for discussion.

- Each item is in the form of a question that focuses on the desired outcome from discussion of that item:

Eg. How can we enhance effective communication across the region.

Addressing Each Agenda Item

Agenda Item Question

- The chair then asks the Agenda Item Question

Thinking Round

- The Chair asks for a volunteer to start and indicates which way round the circle the thinking will move (alternate direction with each thinking round)
- Each person thinks aloud, bringing their "freshest" thinking. The other participants pay attention to catalyse that person's thinking
- The Chair takes their turn in the group

Open Discussion Round

- The Chair sees to it that people are not interrupted when they are speaking

Round

- The Chair asks the question the Team will be addressing in this Round.

Discussion, Round, Discussion, Round...etc

The Chair can then summarise the view points and suggest the common ground / agreements reached

The group then have the opportunity (in a Round) to agree with or shape the conclusions.

Burning Issues

When the meeting is almost at an end, the Chair asks each person:

- Is there a burning issue that you think we should address at another time?

The Closing Round

Any concerns should have been handled or mentioned by this point so that the closing can be wholly positive. The chair asks everyone to answer positively-reflective questions such as:

- What do you think went well in the meeting
- or
- What did you learn from that meeting

And ideally...

- What one quality do you respect in the colleague sitting next to your right?