

A Thinking Environment

This is a term coined by Nancy Kline. According to her, there are ten components of a Thinking Environment.

Attention

Hypothesis: Attention is an act of creation, and the quality of our attention determines the quality of the other's thinking.

In almost any setting the best help we can be is to create the conditions for people to generate their own finest thinking. And when someone is thinking around us, much of the quality of what we are hearing is our effect on them; and that requires that we are sufficiently humble to refrain from even thinking about all our wise ideas while we are listening. In fact, the quality of our attention determines the quality of other people's thinking. Attention, driven by deep respect and genuine interest, and without interruption, is the key to a Thinking Environment. Attention is that powerful. It generates thinking. It is an act of creation.

Equality

Hypothesis: Even in a hierarchy people can be equal as thinkers, and that equality helps them to give of their best.

If we seek to treat everyone equally as a thinker, everyone must get a turn to think out loud and a turn to give attention. To know you will get your turn to speak makes your attention more genuine and relaxed. It also makes your speaking more succinct. Equality keeps the talkative people from silencing the quiet ones. But it also requires the quiet ones to contribute their own thinking. The result is high quality ideas and decisions.

Ease

Hypothesis: Ease creates; urgency destroys.

Ease is an internal state free from rush or urgency which creates the best conditions for thinking. But Ease, particularly in organisations and through the 'push' aspect of social networking, is being systematically bred out of our lives. We need to face the fact that if we want people to think well in the increasingly demanding and target-driven academic environment, we must cultivate internal ease. This implies a preference for quality over the rush of adrenaline.

Appreciation

Hypothesis: The human mind works best in the presence of appreciation

Society (and perhaps particularly academia) teaches us that to be appreciative is to be naïve, whereas to be critical is to be astute. And so, in discussions we often focus first, and sometimes only, on the things that are not working. The consequence is that our thinking is often specious. A skilled listener generates a balanced ratio of appreciation to challenge so that individuals and groups can think at their best.

Encouragement

Hypothesis: To be 'better than' is not necessarily to be 'good.' Mutual encouragement will produce better results than competition.

Competition between people ensures only one thing: if you win, you will have done a better job than the other person did. That does not mean, however, that you will have done anything good. To compete does not ensure certain excellence. It merely ensures comparative success, and can feed unproductive ego-driven behaviours. Competition between thinkers is especially dangerous. It keeps their attention on each other as rivals, not on the huge potential for each to think

courageously for themselves. A Thinking Environment prevents internal competition among colleagues, replacing it with a wholehearted, unthreatened search for good ideas.

Feelings

Hypothesis: Unexpressed feelings can inhibit good thinking.

Thinking stops when we are upset. But if we express feelings just enough, thinking re-starts. Unfortunately, we have this backwards in our society. We think that when feelings start, thinking stops. When we assume this, we interfere with exactly the process that helps a person to think clearly again. If instead, when people start to express feelings, we relax and welcome that, good thinking will resume.

Information

Hypothesis: Withholding or denying information results in intellectual vandalism. Facing what you have been denying leads to better thinking.

We base our decisions on information, accurate or not, all of the time. When the information is incorrect, the quality of our decisions suffers. Starting with accurate information is essential, therefore, if good independent thinking is our aim. The importance of information also pertains to the pernicious phenomenon of denial, the assumption that what is happening is not happening. Learning how to formulate questions that dismantle denial is a powerful feature of Thinking Environment expertise.

Diversity

Hypothesis: The greater the diversity of the group, and the greater the welcoming of diverse points of view, the greater the chance of accurate, cutting-edge thinking

Reality is diverse. Therefore, to think well we need to be in as real, as diverse, a setting as possible. We need to be surrounded by people from many identity groups, and we need to know that there will be no reprisal for thinking differently from the rest of the group.

Incisive Questions

Hypothesis: A wellspring of good ideas lies just beneath an untrue limiting assumption. An Incisive Question will remove it, freeing the mind to think afresh.

Everything human beings do is driven by assumptions. We need to become aware of them, and by asking Incisive Questions, replace the untrue limiting ones with true, liberating ones. The building of Incisive Questions is at the very heart of generating fine independent thinking. These questions have been described as 'a tool of unbelievable precision and power'.

Place

Hypothesis: When the physical environment affirms our importance, we think more clearly and boldly. When our bodies are cared for and respected, our thinking improves.

Nancy Kline has found consistently that Thinking Environments are places that say back to people, 'You matter.' People think better when they can arrive and notice that the place reflects their value - to the people there and to the event. Place is a silent form of appreciation.

Adapted from the work of Nancy Kline: Time to Think and <http://www.timetothink.com/>