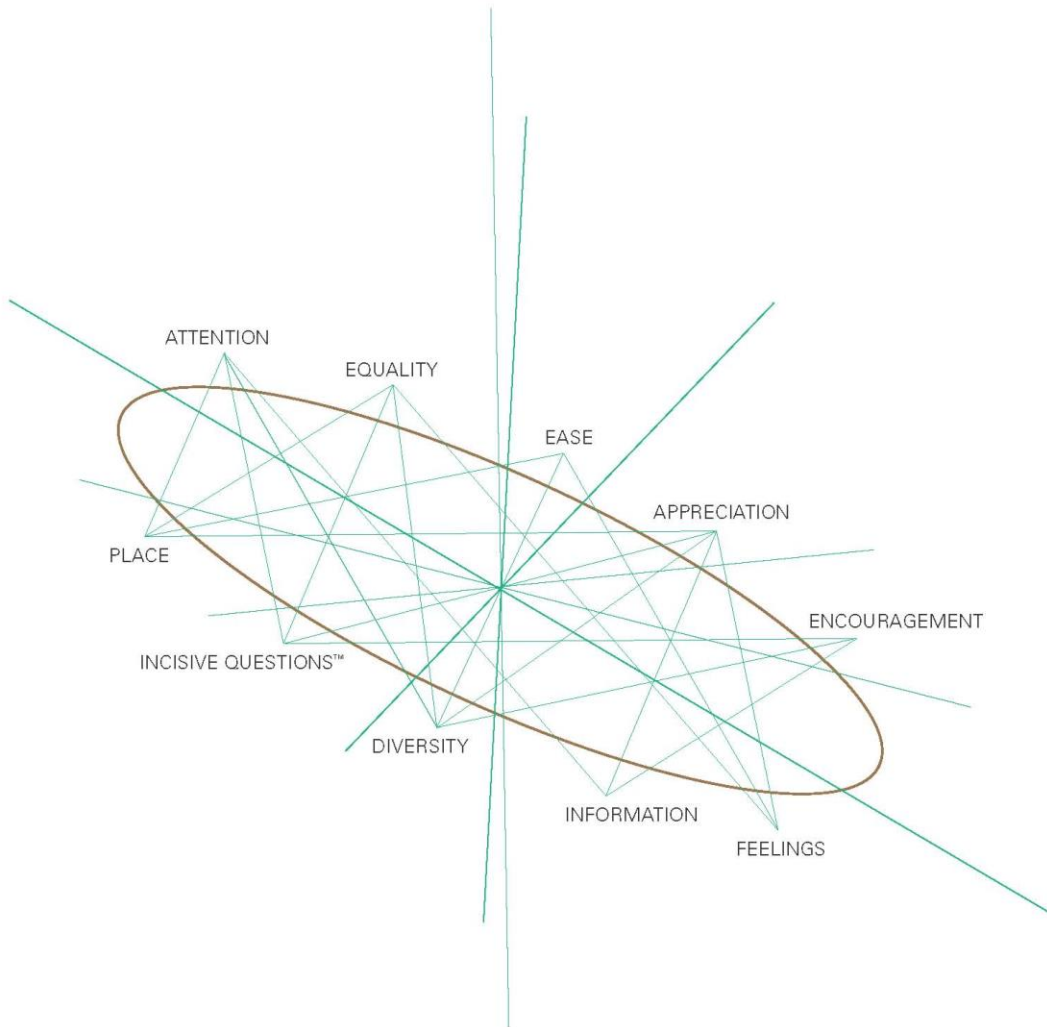# Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment

The origins of the Thinking Environment are steeped in one observation and one question. The observation is "The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first", a statement that has powerful implications. The consequent question is: "What does it take for people to help each other to think well for themselves?"

Nancy Kline articulated this observation and was asking this question over two decades ago, after she had founded a school in her native USA. When she put the question to people, she noticed that the answer tended not to be about IQ, education, or experience; it turned out that the single most important factor in the quality of someone's thinking was the way people were being treated by those around them. Nancy went on to identify ten ways that were most dependable in this regard, and these became known as the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment, shown overleaf and explained in full below:

1. ATTENTION	**Listening with palpable respect and without interruption**
2. EQUALITY	**Treating each other as thinking peers; Giving equal turns and attention; Keeping agreements and boundaries**
3. EASE	**Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency**
4. APPRECIATION	**Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities; Practicing a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism**
5. ENCOURAGEMENT	**Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition**
6. FEELINGS	**Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking**
7. INFORMATION	**Supplying the facts; Dismantling denial**
8. DIVERSITY	**Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities**
9. INCISIVE QUESTIONS™	**Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively**
10. PLACE	**Creating a physical environment that says back to people, "You matter"**

TIME TO THINK

THE TEN COMPONENTS OF A THINKING ENVIRONMENT

ATTENTION

EQUALITY

EASE

APPRECIATION

PLACE

ENCOURAGEMENT

INCISIVE QUESTIONS™

DIVERSITY

INFORMATION

FEELINGS

A Thinking Environment can be created between two people – a Thinking Partnership, comprising Thinker (coachee) and Partner (coach) – or in a group, at a think tank or any other type of meeting.

To me, the most important factor of the Thinking Environment described above is the quality of attention in the listening, while some of the other elements contribute to this. The type of listening that Nancy prescribes is not inactive; she describes it as attention bestowed on the Thinker by the Partner and that, for an effective session, this attention needs to be an equal balance of three streams:

"In the first stream the Partner's attention is on the content of what the Thinker is saying.
In the second stream their attention is on their response to what the Thinker is saying.
In the third stream their attention is on the creation of a Thinking Environment for the Thinker."
-Nancy Kline

Her theories are supported by practical structures which, if adhered to, will enable the Thinker to work through the issues, gain some clarity and find a way forward. The Thinking Session starts with a simple question:

'What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?'

The Thinker is then able to talk through their situation at will. The key here lies in two elements: the quality of attention given by the Partner, and the knowledge from the Thinker that they will not be interrupted; therefore the 'contracting' which takes place prior to the conversation is important, so that the Thinker knows they are going to be given sufficient time to speak and be listened to.

Eventually, the Thinker often reaches a point where everything that initially has come into their thoughts will have been said. They will pause and the Partner can ask:

'What more do you think, or feel or want to say?'

The phrase 'what more' can sound unnatural when spoken in some situations. However, to ask 'what else?' may lead the Thinker into another subject, while 'what else about that?' may limit the Thinker to the same one. As I have said before in this series, the technique must be the tool and not the master, and I have heard Nancy offering similar advice herself. This is a process which has been tried and tested over many years, so it is worthwhile adhering to the exact words where possible; however, the comfort of the Thinker and the rapport within the Partnership are key elements in helping the Thinker to think more clearly, so the words could be changed if necessary to ensure these conditions are met.

When asked to think some more, the Thinker may be surprised at how many different thoughts come to mind, and because they are in the Thinking Environment created by the Partner, they have the leisure to express and explore them. It is a fact that we often find out what we think by talking out loud, and this is one of the core benefits of this process.

'What more?' questions can be asked several times until everything is out on the table and the Thinker is ready to identify what is standing in the way of their goals.

This is where the Partner makes a more active intervention by asking what Nancy terms 'Incisive Questions' ™. The process for this is to:

- identify what might be a limiting assumption, for example 'No-one listens to me around here';
- ask an Incisive Question™ to remove that belief, for example: 'If you knew you would be listened to, what would you say, and to whom?

Some similar questions might be:

- What assumption are you making that is getting in the way?
- If you knew you were to become the boss, what problem would you solve first and how?
- If you knew you are vital to this organisation's success, how would you approach your work?
- If things could be exactly right for you, how would they have to change?

It is important to recognise that the limiting assumption is not necessarily imaginary. The value is in helping the Thinker to face the issue and consider it from different perspectives.

The Thinking Environment is highly effective in group work and meetings. One of the techniques here is the 'Thinking Round', which ensures everyone has a chance to say all they want to. As is the case with the Thinking Partnership, it is the contracting at the start of the meeting which brings the value.

> *"To be interrupted is not good.*
> *To get lucky and not be interrupted is better.*
> *But to know you will not be interrupted allows you truly to think for yourself."*
> - *Nancy Kline*

The principles of the Thinking Environment bear similarities to coaching, which was being developed during the same time period; both are fundamentally about respecting people, caring for their welfare and development, and building relationships grounded in trust. Some of the processes parallel tools used in coaching, such as Clean Language, another strong listening process, and the 'limiting beliefs' model espoused by Neuro Linguistic Programming.

One difference is that Nancy does not recommend reflecting the Thinker's words back, which is a common technique used by coaches. Having experienced being coached by Nancy at a demonstration, I found myself wishing that she would interrupt with the normal coaching interventions of clarifying, reflecting and questioning. However, I was also able to identify that the root of my need was to create a distraction so that I could avoid facing some difficult issues! When given nothing other than 'What more?' from Nancy, I was forced to face these issues and, as a result, reached an unexpected breakthrough. Having said that, I would not dismiss the interventionist coaching techniques from the skill set, as they can be effective in creating rapport and helping to focus the mind in some situations.

Nancy's work highlights the effectiveness of giving people 'a good listening to' (and these are my words, not hers). There is much debate among coaches, especially those in training, as to the most effective questions to ask, what supplementary techniques will lead to new insights for the client, what structures to use and how to 'dance' with the client in the coaching conversation. If we are not careful, the end result can be a coach who gallops all over clients like an enthusiastic pony, focusing on being a star performer and bringer of solutions instead of concentrating on the coachee's experience.

When it comes to her own life, Nancy walks the talk; her courses take place in a stunning riverside environment and include not only comfortable surroundings but excellent lunches! All the other nine principles of the Thinking Environment are respected too, particularly in terms of listening and authentic appreciation. If this sounds a little sycophantic, it is an accurate reflection of the effect that this eloquent and graceful woman seems to have on everyone she comes into contact with.

The biggest takeaway for me from the time I spent studying with Nancy is a reinforcement of the power of listening, giving quality attention, and contracting to do so at the start, so that my coachees, or 'thinkers', have to focus only on their own thought processes without any distractions.

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