

TIME TO THINK

LISTENING TO IGNITE

THE HUMAN MIND



*“Do not be fooled by the simplicity of this process.
It will unleash the power of your whole organization.”*

British Telecom

NANCY KLINE

Time to Think
Listening to Ignite the
Human Mind

Nancy Kline



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influence and model. His personal communication and his leadership are embodiments of this theory. He is a pioneer, bringing Thinking Environment principles and practice to health care, organizational life, politics, friendship and our marriage. In writing this book I hope to have expressed some of the joy we have experienced in seeing and articulating this process together.

The Thinking Environment

- Everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first.
Our thinking depends on the quality of our *attention* for each other.
- Thinking at its best is not just a cool act of cerebration. It is also a thing of the heart.
- A Thinking Environment is the set of ten conditions under which human beings can *think for themselves* – with rigour, imagination, courage and grace.
- Listening of this calibre ignites the human mind.
- Between you and a wellspring of good ideas is a limiting assumption. The assumption can be removed with an Incisive Question.
- Incisive Questions increase the functional intelligence of human beings.
- A Thinking Environment is natural, but rare. It has been squeezed out of our lives and organizations by inferior ways of treating each other.

Organizations, families and relationships can become Thinking Environments again, where good ideas abound, action follows and people flourish.

Time To Think is a comprehensive discussion of this timely, elegant theory and a guide to its model of human behaviour.

Introduction

The day before she died, my mother said a startling thing to me.

‘I apologize,’ she said, ‘for the mess my generation has imposed upon yours. I wish I could have left you a better legacy. I just hope I have left you a measure of courage to face what we have done, and a measure of hope to do something about it.’

‘But regardless, remember that none of it was your fault. It all began long before you were born.’

My mother was not a sociologist nor a business executive or consultant. She was just an ordinary person, shaken, as I think most people are, by what was happening in the world. I don’t know if the mess she was referring to was despotic war, people sleeping in dung on street grates, the sixty-hour white-collar working week, or the end of insect songs as the rain forests burn.

In fact it was probably all of those things. I didn’t ask. I just hugged her. I told her that she herself had been for me the greatest legacy of all.

And that was true. She had left me and my sister and twin brother – and every life she touched – with not only the courage to face the mess, but also with perhaps the most important tool with which to do something about it.

Without knowing it, she had also left to the world of business, organizations and government a key to leadership.

She had listened to us.

She had given us time and space to think.

This book is not about my mother. It is not even only about listening – not the way people usually do it. It is, however, about what can happen if you listen as expertly she did, if you ennoble people with the depth of your attention and shake them to their roots by convincing them that they can think for themselves, if you take them into your heart, if you show them that who they are and what they think matter, profoundly.

This book is also about asking Incisive Questions, questions that will remove blocks and allow people to think of things unimaginable before.

With this high-calibre listening and with Incisive Questions people solve problems they thought were hopeless, they build relationships and organizations that host an embarrassment of riches.

My mother's listening was not ordinary. Her attention was so immensely dignifying, her expression so seamlessly encouraging, that you found yourself thinking clearly in her presence, suddenly understanding what before had been confusing, finding a brand-new, surprising idea. You found excitement where there had been tedium. You faced something. You solved a problem. You felt good again.

She was there, present with you, riveted, fascinated by what scintillating phrase might tumble out of your mouth or what idea you might think of that would take her breath away. The process was so supple you did not stop to notice it. You just enjoyed it. In fact, it was not a process to her. It was just the way life was.

She simply gave attention. But the quality of that attention was catalytic. It would be forty years before I would understand the power of what she was doing.

After university, having trained in education, counselling and philosophy, and inspired by Descartes, I set out on a search for the most basic truth I could find. Eventually, I settled on the observation that everything we *do* depends for its quality on the *thinking* we do first. However determined or indefatigable or charismatic a person may be, their every action is only as good as the idea behind it. I could not get away from the fact that *thinking comes first*. It followed then that *to improve action we had first to improve*

thinking.

Later I co-founded a Quaker school because my colleagues and I wanted to help teenagers to think for themselves. But we did not really know how to do that. So for several years we observed what was going on when our students thought clearly and for themselves, and what was going on when they did not.

We found that IQ, age, background, gender and even experience seemed to have surprisingly little to do with the times when students thought well. The most important factor in whether or not they could think for themselves, afresh, at a given moment seemed to be *how they were being treated by the people with them.*

We were fascinated to discover that when someone in your presence is trying to think, much of what you are hearing and seeing is *your effect* on them. That was progress, because once we could discover what that thinking-enhancing behaviour was, we could learn it and teach it. Unlike IQ or background, behaviour towards someone was not inherent. It could change.

The faculty puzzled over this. Even the less bright students seemed brighter when they were being treated in certain ways. Over the years, as we teased out the components of this Thinking Environment, my mind occasionally went back to my mother.

I remembered that *the way she gave attention to people had helped them think better, to think for themselves*, sometimes for the first time in their life. I studied my memory of it and began to see the details of the dynamic, its profundity belied so smoothly by the natural way she kept her eyes on my eyes, the way she leaned back and rested her head on her hand, at *ease*, the way she folded her legs up under her skirt and settled in. I noted the tone she used and the sounds she made. I remembered that she had laughed but only with me, never at my expense. I remembered her care for the *place* we lived, how important I felt there.

I re-lived how much her *equal* I had felt and how on most subjects she *encouraged* me to go out to the unexplored edge of my ideas, never seeming

alarmed and not seeming ever to compete with me. I remembered, too, how relaxed she was if I should cry or admit to being *afraid* sometimes. I noticed that at certain points, but never intrusively, she would give me *information* I needed. I recalled how much more often she *affirmed* than criticized me, how she *did not interrupt* me or finish my sentences for me, and how her eyes lit up when I found a new and precise way to express something.

I began to see that those simple things had power. My colleagues and I recognized them as a system, one that could be replicated.

The key behaviour was attention.

Much later in my life a chief executive, one of my clients, would sum it up this way: *the quality of a person's attention determines the quality of other people's thinking.*

We reasoned that if the following two statements were true (and they seemed irrefutable),

- everything we do depends on the thinking we do first;
- our thinking depends on the quality of our *attention* for each other, perhaps the most important thing we could do with our life and with our leadership was to listen to people so expertly, to give them attention so respectfully they would begin to think for themselves, clearly and afresh.

Incisive Questions: When High-quality Listening Isn't Enough

Although the quality of attention people gave each other was crucial, we soon noticed that sometimes listening this well, for all its power, was not quite enough. Something else was needed, something that could take the thinker past blocks that expert attention alone had not been able to dislodge.

Unsystematically, haphazardly almost, we had already been removing the blocks. We knew that the process had something to do with questions. But we did not really know why certain questions worked or how to construct them successfully every time. Nor did we even know what generically the blocks were. We certainly could not yet teach others. We could impress. But

we could not empower.

Only after two years of further practice and observation did we see the obvious: that the blocks were almost always *assumptions* being made by the thinker unawares, assumptions that seemed like truth. These limiting assumptions were making it impossible for the thinker's ideas to flow further. Of all the impediments to thinking, of which there are many, these limiting assumptions seemed to be the most deadly.

Soon we saw that there are three types of assumptions and several subsets of those. We determined that being able to recognize the different types of assumptions that are limiting people's thinking helped us to remove them.

We dissected the questions that seemed to work. Eventually we understood them. Their construction had been clean and logical and replicable. Best of all, they were highly teachable.

So over the years we enhanced that basic but mighty listening process with an also-mighty process we call Incisive Questions, so that the human mind, first freed by being paid the highest-quality attention, can also leap past debilitating assumptions, able then to think of things inconceivable before.

The Ten Components

Eventually the essential behaviours which helped people think for themselves became clear. There seemed to be ten, and for the most part they were simple. They were ten ways of being together, ten ways of treating each other. We called this combination the Thinking Environment.

We could see that people do not have to have an IQ of 180, an Oxbridge degree or a sizzling CV to think for themselves with clarity and imagination. They just have to be immersed in these ten things. When they are, they think beautifully. And they act with courage.

The Thinking Environment: A Practical Model

I now spend all my professional life teaching this process. My associates and

I, through Time To Think, Inc., teach organizations how to become Thinking Environments. In particular we teach them how to develop team effectiveness this way. We also teach individuals how to be what is called Thinking Partners and to offer each other Thinking Sessions which bring about rapid and dependable personal development. And we teach couples and families how to treat each other this well.

In just about any place where human beings collect and communicate, people find this process works. Some say, in fact, that they didn't think it was possible for human beings to come up with so many good ideas in such a short time. They find also that ideas turn into action more quickly and confidently after they have had time to think in this way. People say they enjoy the inexorable logic of this process, and its beauty.

They say it is just the way life should be.

That doesn't surprise me. I agree that a Thinking Environment is the way life and work and love and everything human was meant to be. I think that our first duty to each other as human beings is to help each other fulfil our nature. And surely the most quintessentially human part of human nature is to think for ourselves. Our minds were designed with the most breathtaking accuracy to do exactly that.

Recently I was enlightened by one woman's summary of a Thinking Environment. She and I were at a business reception together. Earlier that morning, while I was dressing for the reception, I had rehearsed what I would say in case someone should ask, as they inevitably do, 'So, what do you do?'

Those moments at receptions are easy to dread because you usually have less than four seconds in which to respond before the eyes of the one asking have meandered elsewhere, scanning the room in that highly refined, networking way for a more prestigious or riveting person to talk to. So as I sprayed my hair, I prepared my four-second answer.

Later at the reception when someone did say, 'So what do you do, Nancy?' I replied, 'I am President of Time To Think, Inc., an international leadership consultancy teaching people in organizations how to help each other think

for themselves.’ Four seconds.

I smiled. The woman took a sip of wine and said, ‘Oh, really? How on earth do you do that?’ She was not scanning the room yet.

I was so pleased that I gave her practically my whole opening lecture. And at the end of my pedantic rambling, she said, ‘Oh, I see. In other words [she probably meant fewer], if you set up the right conditions, people *will* think for themselves.’

‘That’s it,’ I said, humbled.

Create a particular environment, and people will think for themselves. It is that simple.

We can create a Thinking Environment for each other at any time. We can set up these conditions for each other in our offices, waiting for the bus, chopping vegetables, walking the dog, in the lab, round the fire, on the phone, between the sheets and across even the most mahogany of board-room tables. The quality of our attention and of the Incisive Questions we ask can become just the way life is.

This Book: A Summary

This book is in four parts. Part One discusses in detail the ten components of a Thinking Environment. Part Two describes the two major applications of the theory: the Thinking Organization and the Thinking Partnership. Part Three imagines how five important arenas of human life and work (health, schools, politics, love relationships and families) could change if they became Thinking Environments. Part Four acknowledges our dreams for the world, asserting that *until we are free to think for ourselves, our dreams are not free to unfold*. The Epilogue pays tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales, suggesting that in public life people have a responsibility to create a Thinking Environment for others.

The Benefits of a Thinking Environment

Turning our world into a Thinking Environment will require the best from all of us. So why should we bother to do it?

Because our days and nights are tightening. Change engorges our organizations; fear constricts our vision. Because in this out-of-control world, it is time for people to think.

Because even though more and more people are saying, 'We don't take time to think about what we are doing; we are too busy doing it', there is time to think. In fact, to take time to think is to gain time to live.

We should create a Thinking Environment because it works. Because everything depends on it. And because if you get good at it, you have a tool for life.

I believe that it is time for a Thinking Environment to become the centrepiece of organizations, relationships and families. We have been without it too long. And it shows.

By mastering the theory and skill of a Thinking Environment people do enrich their work, their life and their relationships. Organizations do produce better ideas in less time with better business outcomes. They also increase the motivation and commitment of their work force. And children who grow up in a Thinking Environment do treat others well and live responsibly.

All of this is reason enough to do it. But perhaps most important is the possibility that by taking steps in this way to turn our world into a Thinking Environment, into a place this stimulating, this kind, this alive, this authentic, where no human mind is wasted, and no human heart is trampled, we will not only improve things for ourselves but we may also create a legacy we would be proud to leave.

Part One

**A Thinking Environment:
Its Ten Components**

CHAPTER 1

Why a Thinking Environment Matters

Thinking for yourself
is the thing on which
everything else depends.

No one could stop Dan. It was against the rules. It was his turn to speak and no one was allowed to interrupt him.

I watched the Thinking Environment meeting format save thousands of lives and millions of dollars that day.

It was the Thinking Environment team development day for Dan's team. The company had been developing a drug for over two years. The executives were impatient for the prototype to be finished and put into clinical trials. Most of the people on the team agreed that if they waited much longer to get it out, their rival company would beat them to it.

On this second day of the Thinking Environment course I was coaching the chair of the meeting. People arrived seeming robust. Dan, the toxicologist, however, looked worried. But they said Dan was always worried. They said he was hopelessly negative. A frequent hidden agenda item was to side-step Dan.

One of the components of a Thinking Environment is *equality*. Another is *listening* with respect and without interruption. Another is *removing limiting assumptions*. Another is *appreciation*. This means that everyone at certain points, including at the beginning, has a turn to speak without interruption and with respectful attention from everyone else.

We began. As required in a Thinking Environment the chair opened the meeting by focusing on something positive in the team's work together. Going systematically around the group, she asked everyone to say what they thought was going well in the project. They all did this adequately. But Dan turned to me at the end of his turn and said, 'Do we ever get to say anything negative in this Thinking Environment thing? Do we ever actually deal with problems?'

'Yes,' I said. 'The positive beginning means that people then deal with the problems better.'

Dan nodded, not entirely hiding a sneer.

The chair then outlined the agenda and began with the clinical trials item. True to the Thinking Environment model, she went round the group, giving everyone a chance to speak before any discussion could begin. There were twelve people. The first eight said in one way or another that more delay would kill the project. Then it was Dan's turn. As he opened his mouth, I thought about the opening lines of *King Lear*, when Lear starts off furious and just gets more so.

I watched the group. Some rolled their eyes, some looked down and began to doodle. Several sighed. The chair reminded everyone that they had to keep their eyes on Dan and let their faces communicate respect for *him as a thinker*. They straightened up, reluctantly.

I watched Dan. His anger escalated. People looked scared. He said all the things he had been trying to say for months, pointing out the dangers suggested in the laboratory tests. He finally reached his main point. He said, 'This product causes liver lesions in rabbits. If we go to human trials now, it will be very expensive because we are likely to catalyse cancer in humans and then our product will be dead in the water. And all the money spent

over these past two years will go down the toilet. We may have to kill this project to avoid killing people.'

This was just what the team did not want to hear. But they had to keep listening because Dan wasn't through. It was still his turn. 'We are a long way off human trials yet,' he nearly shouted.

Then quite suddenly his rage plateaued. He stopped talking. Nobody moved. He looked out past the group towards the window. Fifteen seconds passed. Then he looked down. He still did not speak. I was comfortable with this because I have seen it so many times. It is the productive quiet of the busy thinker. But some of the group shifted in their seats. Ordinarily someone would have shredded his quiet. This time they couldn't.

At the end of an eternity of about thirty more seconds Dan, unbelievably, sparkled. This cynic turned almost sweet. He 'looked up' from his thoughts and said, 'Actually thinking about it now, I think I could get the kinks out of this thing in just under three months. Just give me three months.'

That was it. He was finished. And he looked around the group. His fresh face seemed to say to the exhausted faces of the others, 'Hi! So what's the matter with you guys?'

The chair, visibly shaken, said, 'OK, well, let's keep going around. Ahmed?'

Ahmed sat up in his chair and took a deep breath, shook his head and then said, 'I can go with three months. I was assuming it would take eight.'

And the next person said, 'Three months, no problem.'

And to a person everyone agreed.

Still rattled, the chair summed up the decision, and glanced down at her Thinking Environment 'cheat sheet'. She said, 'It says here that all of us have a turn now to say what we thought was good about today's meeting and then to say what we respect about the person on our right. So, Doug?'

They did it squirming but with sincerity. As always it worked. And the meeting was over.

I heard Dan say as he walked out of the room, 'Well, what happened? How come nobody blasted my head off today?'

And the chair asked me afterwards, 'Can it have been that simple? Did the meeting work well just because everyone had a turn and we did not interrupt – because we listened?'

Yes.

When I hear about the safety of that compound now, I think about that meeting.

A Thinking Environment is the set of conditions under which people can think for themselves and think well together. They make it possible for people's thinking to move further, go faster, plumb insights, banish blocks and produce brand-new, exactly needed ideas in record time. These conditions are analysed in detail in Chapters 3–12.

We can provide a Thinking environment for each other anywhere, at any time. But first we have to decide to take the leap. We have to be willing to think for ourselves.

CHAPTER 2

Thinking for Yourself

Thinking for yourself
is still a radical act.

Thinking for yourself is not a popular activity, though it should be. Every step of real progress in our society has come from it. But in most circles, particularly in places that shape our lives – families, schools and most work places – thinking for yourself is regarded with suspicion. Some institutions thwart it on purpose. It can be seen as dangerous.

I was reminded of this sad fact at a when a fellow guest asked me the subject of a book I was planning to write. I told him that it was about how people can help each other to think for themselves. ‘Oh dear,’ he said, ‘I don’t think much of that; I much prefer people do as they’re told.’ I later found out that he is the fourth-generation president of one of the world’s largest oil companies.

When was the last organizational vision statement you saw that included the words ‘... to develop ourselves into a model environment in which everyone at every level can think for themselves’? For that matter, when was the last time somebody asked you, ‘What do you really think, *really*?’ and then waited for you to answer at length?

This dearth should not surprise us. Hardly anyone has been encouraged, much less trained, to think for themselves, and their teachers and parents and bosses weren't either. And neither were theirs. (We may have learned to revere thinkers like Socrates, but we also learned that the state poisoned him for thinking for himself: not unmitigated encouragement.)

Occasionally, however, we do have a teacher or mentor who truly wants us to develop our own thinking. They give us glimpses. When I was thirteen years old, I was put into an advanced algebra course. On the first day the teacher, who was maligned by students as a hard teacher because she tried to get them to think, stood in front of the blackboard and said, 'On the paper in front of you write the sum of a number.'

The entire class of thirty-five pubescent people just stared at her. She repeated the direction. 'Write the sum of a number.'

I remember my hand gathering sweat around the pencil. A few heads looked down and their pencils started up. I wondered what in the world they were writing. I saw the girl across the aisle from me lean forward and peer over the shoulder of the boy in front of her who was scribbling something. Then she scratched a figure and immediately covered it with her hand.

The teacher paced and rubbed the chalk between her fingers. I wondered what she was about to put on the board. I was now the only one not writing. I leaned back and over my left shoulder whispered to my friend, 'What is it?' 'Seven,' she whispered back.

So I wrote '7' on my paper. I kept my head down, hoping I looked busy and confident.

After the agony among us had become tactile, the teacher asked us for our answers. The number 7 was prevalent. She walked slowly over to the board and wrote: 'There is no such thing as the sum of a number.'

I knew that.

Why didn't you write it?

Sarah said it was 7.

Why did you ask her?

Because – I don't know.

That's right. From now on, think for yourself.

I was too scared around that teacher for the rest of my young life to think very well in her presence. But I took the message with me and gradually examined and valued it. I don't recommend humiliating people into thinking for themselves as she had. She certainly did not create a Thinking Environment for us. Had she affirmed our intelligence first and spoken about the joy of thinking for ourselves, had she not fanned our fear of her, we would all have learned even more powerfully what it meant to do our own thinking. And we might have been able to think well around her too.

But at least she introduced the concept into my academic life. That would not happen again for a long time – not until I was seventeen, when my English teacher required us to write an in-class essay on one of the following two topics:

1 How would you propose we restructure the lunch period?

2 What would change in the world if the men had the babies?

She allowed us thirty minutes in which to do this.

What would change in the world if the men had the babies? I thought she was kidding. She said she wasn't. This was in 1963, and in Dallas, Texas. Nobody I knew for a thousand miles on either side of that city was asking questions like that. The only explanation I could imagine was that my teacher did not like her periods and wished them on men, or perhaps that, contrary to what my mother had said, my teacher *could* remember the pain of labour in childbirth and also wished that on men. I had no idea what she was getting at. So I wrote about lunch.

It was nearly thirty years later before I realized that she had asked an extremely important question. And it was to that memory I went back when I began searching for what to do to encourage people to explore their own thinking and to express it. That teacher set the choice before me – to think about mundane things or big things, but in any case to choose to do my own thinking. There was no humiliation from her ever and no judgement. I decided a year later that I wanted to be an English teacher when I grew up.

this group of young people than this terrain between any one of them and the rest of the group. I suspect that when teenagers complain of being bored so much of the time, it is likely to be tied to the all-consuming activity of trying to be someone else. This is probably true for adults too.

So I said, 'When was the last time someone asked you what you think?' And slowly, slowly they began to talk. I'll never forget what Lisa said: 'No one ever has asked me that question. I do remember my dad saying not to get smart with him when I had an opinion. He said it was a sign of disrespect. And he had the back of his hand to prove it.'

Lisa and Bristol, like most people, went through their entire childhood and most of their teen years learning how to fit in rather than to think for themselves. They said they did not want to be relegated to nerdhood. They did not want to lose their friends.

As children we learn to look to authorities to do our thinking for us. Then from the minute we make friends we look to them for what to think. Wherever we are, we look around, check out the scene and think what we imagine others are thinking, what we are expected to think. Even at the graduate level, schools teach us ever more sophisticated ways of doing this. Most religions require it for salvation.

In the corporations and governments and families that employ me as a consultant I watch those 'fourteen-year-olds' in the discussions. As middle-aged Bristols they are looking around. They are sussing it out: what are they *supposed* to think here, what will keep them in favour with the people who hired them, who appraise their performance, who determine how fine a school they can choose for their children, who vote for the winners of the professional prizes? Doing what everyone else does, thinking what everyone else thinks is rewarded.

Some people tell me that they are afraid of their own thoughts, that they prefer just to keep on going rather than to stop and think about what they are doing. They fear the upheaval, they say, that may result from finding out what they really do think. The *status quo* is safer.

Thus, at this moment in human history, thinking for yourself is still a

radical act. And until we decide that we must do whatever it takes to stop abdicating our thinking, until we see that our *real* survival depends on thinking for ourselves, we will look through those teenage periscopes in every meeting and in every relationship for the rest of our life.

Thinking for yourself is the only reliable road to real safety. Thinking for yourself leads to more happiness, not less. It offers more, not less, respect between you and the people with whom you live and work and whom you love. People may tell you in subtle ways that doing your own thinking is dangerous, but what is really dangerous is to keep on not doing it. To keep tightening our vast minds until they cannot breathe constricts our society and our souls.

If you dare to be radical in this way, to do your own thinking every day, and to help others to do the same, lastingly good things will happen. New ideas that work well, ideas that have been needed for ages, will emerge. Systems that we revere but are hurting us will be exposed and replaced with better ones. Misunderstandings will fade. You will enjoy the fun of it.

But given the misgivings people have about doing this ‘thinking thing’, this most natural and beautiful and necessary thing, we need the right conditions under which to do it. That is why the piecing together of the Thinking Environment has kept me riveted for years.

The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment

1 Attention Listening with respect, interest and fascination.

2 Incisive Questions Removing assumptions that limit ideas.

3 Equality Treating each other as thinking peers.

- Giving equal turns and attention.
- Keeping agreements and boundaries.

4 Appreciation Practising a five-to-one ratio of appreciation to criticism.

- 5 Ease** Offering freedom from rush or urgency.
- 6 Encouragement** Moving beyond competition.
- 7 Feelings** Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking.
- 8 Information** Providing a full and accurate picture of reality.
- 9 Place** Creating a physical environment that says back to people, 'You matter.'
- 10 Diversity** Adding quality because of the differences between us.

CHAPTER 3

Attention

Listening of this calibre
ignites the human mind.

The quality of your attention
determines the quality of other
people's thinking.

I have listened to lots of people over the years – most of them professionally and some just because we were together. I don't know of one person among those many who, under the right conditions, didn't have interesting and important things to say.

Colleagues sometimes ask me whether I ever get bored listening to people. Yes: under one circumstance. If people are not saying what they really think, when they are chronically ducking and censoring or trying to impress or placate, I am bored. But if people are thinking for themselves about things that really matter to them, I am fascinated. You can tell when a person has just moved from let-me-please-you thinking back to their own mind – they go from soporific to scintillating just like that. I enjoy those

moments hugely.

Beneath the fear of being punished for thinking for themselves, most people have ideas that matter, ideas that would make a difference if they could be developed fully. People, regardless of their position or status, can think of things that move discussions to whole new levels of sparkle and resolution. Individuals you would never suspect of being interesting have absorbing stories to tell and disturbing insights that would humble even the most long-winded of us right out of our self-importance and rush. If the conditions are right, the huge intelligence of the human being surfaces. Ideas seem to come from nowhere and sometimes stun us.

The best conditions for thinking, I assumed for years, were hyper-critical, competitive and urgent. Schools, organizations, governments and families convince us of that. But in fact it is in schools, organizations, governments and families that people do some of their worst thinking. That is because the conditions for thinking there are usually appalling.

The best conditions for thinking, if you really stop and notice, are not tense. They are gentle. They are quiet. They are unrushed. They are stimulating but not competitive. They are encouraging. They are paradoxically both rigorous and nimble.

Attention, the act of listening with palatable respect and fascination, is the key to a Thinking Environment. Listening of this calibre is enzymatic. When you are listening to someone, much of the quality of what you are hearing is *your effect on them*. Giving good attention to people makes them more intelligent. Poor attention makes them stumble over their words and seem stupid. Your attention, your listening is that important.

We think we listen, but we don't. We finish each other's sentences, we interrupt each other, we moan together, we fill in the pauses with our own stories, we look at our watches, we sigh, frown, tap our finger, read the newspaper, or walk away. We give advice, give advice, give advice. Even professional listeners listen poorly much of the time. They come in too soon with their own ideas. They equate talking with looking professional. Corporate leaders can be the worst. I even knew one chief executive who

the brain that contains the problem probably also contains the solution. Then set up the conditions for them to find it.

Andrea was a niche entrepreneur. She grew rare herbs. After twenty years in corporate leadership she had left to follow her heart. She wanted to find a way to combine art and health in one perfect product. These fragile leafy clusters were it.

Three posh restaurants had just commissioned her herbs that week. She was thrilled. I never knew anyone more focused or full of fire than Andrea. Then she came to me one day listless.

‘I have a business plan. But I am not doing it. It is sitting there on my table, snoozing. This is not like me. I don’t know what to do to get myself in gear on this.’

I had two choices. I could tell her what to do or I could listen. The choice wasn’t all that hard. For one thing I didn’t know even two measly things about herbs. And telling a dynamo like Andrea just to get on the stick and stop procrastinating was like screaming at Apollo to lift off. So I listened. And was I glad that I had.

Andrea did the most amazing thing with my attention. ‘I grow these green babies in my back garden. I like that,’ she said. ‘That is why I left Alcon, so I could have control over my days and be home in every sense. I have plenty of room and the growing’s excellent. Clients are pleased. Now, to expand, I need to have an Open Day, a sort of micro-Chelsea Herb Show this spring in my garden, and this little business of mine will take off. I know it.

‘But I keep not organizing the show. It is maddening. My husband Jacob says I am a Meyers Briggs E and need outside stimulus to get me going. No internal discipline. He’s wrong about that. I have always been my own best motivator.’

Andrea suddenly went quiet. She look out across the room and leaned forward in her chair. I said nothing. A half-minute passed. I did not move. Something was happening.

‘Maybe I am just disorganized. I need someone to come in and be my time

and space manager. I could already afford that. I need someone to pick up that business plan and hit me over the head with it and then march me around until I get the herb show started.'

I still did not speak.

Andrea sat back. 'No, that is not it. I am plenty organized. That is not the problem. And I would just maul the person if they came in like that. I would hate it.'

She looked out into the space of my office again. I followed her eyes with mine and imagined what I could not see: the uncountable twinkly things firing off of each other back there somewhere, in that chamber of her mind off limits to me. She was working. Still, quiet, but busy.

Her face smoothed. Her eyes closed. 'I know what the problem is,' she said slowly. She was quiet again. 'I will have to be open if I do that plan. I will have to open my garden. I will have to open my house, my space, my solitude, my heart. I don't know if I can do that. I have put it off most of my life, opening up. It is easy in corporate life and in upper-class Bangladeshi culture and in Britain to stay closed.

'That's it. I will have to be open if I pick up that business plan. Thanks. I can do something about this now.'

Can you imagine what a waste of time and brains it would have been if I had crashed into her thinking process with insignificant advice about 'just doing it'? She would have argued with me, gone home, looked at the business plan and taken a nap. I wanted to say when she thanked me that I hadn't done anything. But by now in this long search to understand a Thinking Environment I knew different.

Interruption

What is it about interruption that is so tantalizing? We seem unable to resist doing it. I once asked a group what they were assuming that made them interrupt their colleagues. They listed these things:

- My idea is better than theirs.
- If I don't interrupt them, I will never get to say my idea.

- I know what they are about to say.
- They don't need to finish their thought since mine is an improvement.
- Nothing about their idea will improve with further development.
- I am more important than they are.
- It is more important for me to be seen to have a good idea than it is for me to be sure they complete their thought.
- Interrupting them will save time.

I almost gasped when I heard a senior manager say while interrupting one of his direct reports in a meeting once, 'Steven, let me just develop the idea you were about to have.'

Finishing people's sentences for them should be studied by epidemiologists. It is a behaviour that has taken over our relationships. We do it to each other all the time. What is the rush? Why is it so difficult just to breathe out and let the person finish their own sentence for themselves?

Tailgating in this way is an insult. When you finish someone's sentence for them you are assuming

1 that they cannot finish it themselves before the world ends;

2 that your words will be their words or better;

3 that it won't hurt them if you do and waiting another giga-second for them to finish will damage you.

Silly, isn't it? None of these bears out.

In fact, most of the time we are wrong about what the person is going to say. Usually they come up with a completely different word or phrase. Often they find in their own mind a much more rich expression. They nearly always come up with a word or phrase that is more precise, more colourful, more *theirs*.

A friend illustrated this point dramatically. She said, 'I am stumped about Larry. As his manager I think I should recommend that we fire ...' She stopped mid-sentence. I waited a polite three seconds, started to supply the word 'Larry' just as she said, '... up his imagination and natural talent a bit more.' I was glad I had not spoken; I would have been not only pedestrian