

Linda: The Thinking Environment seems to have really captured the attention of the coaching community. What are your thoughts on this?

Nancy: Ten years ago the head of a coaching accreditation programme invited me to speak at their conference. I was surprised, and I asked her why they were interested in the Thinking Environment. She said, 'Because the real point of coaching is that clients do their own thinking and emerge with ideas the coach could never have conceived.' 'Really?' I said, 'that is wonderful.' I was hopeful.

Until then I had gathered that the point of coaching was, in the end, for the coach to offer their finest thinking to the client and to keep the client focused on outcomes set out at the beginning. I had also thought that the point of sponsored coaching in particular was for the coach to make certain the outcomes of the sessions were outcomes the sponsor required. I had thought that these outcomes even needed to be translated into metrics. So I was pleased to hear that the young field of coach accreditation put the client's independent thinking first.

Ten years on, as the world of coaching has formalised and the most revered contract of coaching is the sponsored contract, I find myself in a new version of my original quandary. What is the point of coaching, and how committed is this still-fledgling field to the path of uninterrupted, non-interjectionist, generative independent thinking of the client? Can we on the one hand agree to determine ahead of time what the outcomes (of the series and the session) will be, and on the other hand be the kind of presence that generates new, hopefully disturbing, ideas, decision, actions and perspectives?

A few coaching programmes and institutions do understand the profound undertaking that is the commitment to the client's own thinking. That is encouraging to me. These programmes embrace the observation that reality is nonlinear, that it cannot be predicted, planned or controlled, that the pre-set outcomes are not inherently good and are inherently infantilising, and are not in fact possible. They understand that for coaches to mould the sessions toward a previously agreed result is to engage in fantasy. Actually it is worse than that. It is an act of hubris because it actively blocks the path to much-needed re-thinking of the very systems that are doing the sponsoring, and the very coaching that is doing the moulding.

So I am intrigued. Most of the coaches I meet arrive with a kind of insatiable voraciousness for expertise that liberates the mind of the client. At the same time I hear from them deep concerns that this is not what will pass muster either with the accrediting bodies or the corporate sponsors.

So maybe the coaching community's increasing interest in the Thinking Environment signals an exciting crossroads. Maybe on the subject of independent thinking and non-linear reality coaches want now to engage in robust conversation with accrediting bodies and sponsors, rather than to be in thrall to them.

I do remember a conversation I had a few years ago with a potential client's executive sponsor. After confirming that my approach is to generate the independent thinking of the client, wherever it goes, he sighed and then said, 'That's probably best. But please just promise me one thing.' 'What's that?' I asked. 'Promise me,' he said, 'that she won't leave as a result of your coaching.' 'I can't do that,' I said. He smiled and said, 'I know. I just thought I'd try.'

If the goal of coaching is to help a client to generate their own finest thinking, and if they come to the session with certain concrete goals, such as behaviour change, we need to allow them to generate their own thinking on that topic, wherever it may lead. They will in the end create something more intelligent, more useful, and full of their own energy for implementation. We cannot do that for them. Nor should we try.

Linda: When I wrote about the Thinking Environment in Therapy Today in 2010, it generated a lot of interest from therapists. It has been called the most client-centred form of coaching since Carl Rogers' Person-Centred therapy. What you think about its use by therapists?

Nancy: That's interesting. Therapists have been fascinated by the Thinking Environment since the very early days of this work. But the Thinking Environment grew outside the fields of coaching, counselling and therapy. It is inherently none of them. It is an uncategorisable, powerful way for two people to be with each other so that one can think beautifully, wholly for themselves. That is all.

But because it liberates the mind of the client profoundly, formally categorised professional fields sometimes see it as sitting on a spectrum of their field. In that context I guess it is accurate to say that the Thinking Environment is entirely, even exquisitely, Person-Centred.

Very early on in the discovery and unfolding of the Thinking Session process, about 1993, one of the practitioners in the US that embraced it most was a therapist. More therapists and counsellors then took the the new Thinking Environment courses, keen to find their own ways to use the process to reach and work with people.

One therapist said that the Thinking Environment's expertise of offering sustained, generative Attention was often more productive than her usual, more interjectionist, approach. She said she also was beginning to focus on assumptions and building Incisive Questions, rudimentary as they were in those days. This is not surprising because the key untrue assumption lived as true is at the core of the client's story, and so it is often where there is most movement for them. Some therapists have suggested that liberation from the untrue limiting assumption is itself a core therapeutic process.

And probably it is that process, together with the inbuilt equality of the relationship that is established within the Thinking Environment, that makes the difference. Uncontaminated Attention builds relationships. So perhaps one reason therapists and coach-therapists are more and more interested in the Thinking Environment is that it does progress their ability to build warm relationships.

Also, the client usually brings to the therapy a long-term lack of experience in thinking for themselves, reenforced by a number of assumptions about independent thinking. This process encourages them to think for themselves. And it treats them as true adults. That in itself is liberating.

Finally, I am finding these days that coaches less often ask me worried questions about whether the Thinking Environment process is therapy in disguise. Thanks to the accessible neuroscience now there seems to be more understanding of the importance of reflection and emotion in personal and business development, and of the telling of our stories.

Linda: What are your thoughts about my use of the Thinking Environment in integrative coaching practice?

Nancy: I think what you've recognised is a fact of nature. The reality is that compartmentalisation is a made-up construct. Compartmentalisation doesn't exist in nature. Everything is part of everything else. And it doesn't exist in our work with people. Therapy as separate from coaching is a concocted distinction. I of course appreciate the concerns that coaches may well have not been trained to deal with diagnosable psychological 'conditions' and 'pathologies.' And no one should pretend to work outside their expertise. But even inside that caveat the lines between various approaches to helping clients are blurred, even murky. We do well I think to recognise that all of life swims in connected waters. We make linear distinctions because language forces us to do that. But the distinctions do not exist. No detail exists separate from its context.

What you have done is to recognise this and to point out that the client will not be, cannot be, boxed. Similarly, the professional approach to the client cannot be contained. Some therapists hold on to their need to be regarded as more advanced than coaches. And they eschew the business focus of coaching. Some coaches for their part have claimed the cognitive territory, seeing coaching as free of the complications and treacherousness of feelings. This has meant in some coaching sessions that the client, stepping toward emotion or childhood memories, is pulled back from the 'brink' and required to focus firmly on the action goal of the session, to race to the harbour. Rough seas, some coaches say, are not the stuff of coaching. 'This is coaching,' they would remind the client, 'not therapy.'

I think there will be a day, maybe fifty years from now, maybe sooner, when none of these nonexistent, forced divisions will be defended. Counselling/therapy/coaching will be regarded as the serendipitous integration that it is. The question will then be: what qualifying programmes are best for such a broad expertise? Which programmes will make the aspirant coach/therapist/counsellor able to do the work that the client truly wants and needs?

There are three questions I am thinking about these days:

1. Shall we speak by invitation only? If the client's fully independent thinking is our aim (even when the topic is agreed in advance), our generative Attention will produce it. And it will keep on producing it until it cannot any more. At which point, the client can invite us to speak. At that point, aware that the client often can generate even more before they need our input, we can ask, 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' Then when they complete another wave of thinking and invite us to speak, we can ask that same question (experienced as new by the client, by the way) again. After many such waves of thinking, the client will finish completely, and invite us to speak. And if we first ask them what more they want to achieve from the session, they and we can determine the route to that outcome. If we speak by invitation only, we can relax as the client thinks, and our ease will generate even more, even higher quality, thinking in them. And we need not be surprised when our Attention and the 'What more?' question are all they need to reach a brilliant outcome for the session. That can happen. Attention can be that generative, when it is not truncated by our uninvited interjection.

2. How do we know for sure that what we are about to say will be more valuable than what our client is about to think? In that tantalising moment during our listening when we have just had the most sensationally useful idea for the client, can we stop and ask ourselves that question? And can we face the answer: We cannot know for sure. And if we speak uninvited, we risk killing the chance for something to be ignited that is much better than our idea. To insert our idea before the client has had full chance to conceive theirs is, when you think about it, unthinkable. And it is unnecessary, because our idea is now conceived; we can retrieve it later if it turns out to be useful. But the client's incipient thought is not even formed, much less retrievable later. If we interrupt their thinking to insert ours, neither they nor we will know what could have been. Hubris enters here again, just when we need humility.

3. Are there essentially two worlds of thinking? One world of thinking is huge and prevalent. It could be called the world of 'exchange thinking'. The other world is tiny and rare. Let's call it the world of 'fully independent thinking'. Most interactions (and coaching sessions) are in the world of exchange thinking. We listen long enough to decide what to say, and we say it. This is the world of input, input that draws primarily on the known, the accepted, the tried. The focus is on both people at once. Neither has a chance fully to develop their own thinking without input. The world of fully independent thinking, on the other hand, is a world of attention. It is a world of the unknown, the untried, the fresh. It is I think where coaching should take place, entirely if

possible; largely, for sure. We need to grow the world of fully independent thinking so that it sits side by side, as an equal, with the well-established and huge world of exchange thinking. They need each other.

Linda: Where do you see the Thinking Environment going?

Nancy: The Thinking Environment just is. To me it is not a phenomenon or a thing. If anything it is a label for the world at its best, and it speaks to us all of the time. When we are alert to it and listening, we discover more about how to produce it wherever we are. Humanity has been on this journey of discovery and understanding for as long as we have been humanity. Equally, we have only just begun this journey. So it might be most accurate to say that the Thinking Environment isn't going anywhere. It is everywhere. We are the ones who need to go – to it.

But from a 'phenomenon' point of view, the Thinking Environment is being seen as an important 'how' for mindfulness. Also, John Spiegel in the USA is building a new process for relationship mediation with the Thinking Environment at its heart. Scott Farnsworth is developing the world of youth philanthropy with the Thinking Environment as its core culture. Christopher Davies in the UK has developed his own extraordinary approach in the field of autism which is consciously consistent with the Thinking Environment. Also, the latest leadership focus in executive teams around the globe is on listening as the core leadership expertise, and the Thinking Environment is the process of choice for creating these leaders who listen. I continue also to be encouraged as healthcare moves in this direction, in some particularly enlightened corners of the NHS.

Along the way I am finding in unexpected places whole theoretical and unplanned endorsements of the most challenging aspects of the Thinking Environment. Most recently I have been studying this resonance in the work of Nassim Taleb in his new book *Antifragile*. He offers (unintentionally, of course) another prism through which to understand why the Thinking Environment works. Another example, I guess, of its going nowhere because it is everywhere.

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