



'To subjugate a group of people, the first and key thing to do...

... is to convince them and the world that they lack intelligence and cannot think'

Carolyn Mumby talks to Nancy Kline, internationally renowned creator of the Thinking Environment, about how practitioners can truly help clients to do their own thinking

Carolyn Mumby: *Your new book is called **The Promise That Changes Everything: I won't interrupt you. Why did you write the book and what is it in your view that makes this promise so hard for professional coaches and therapists to make and to keep?***

Nancy Kline: I wanted most of all to convey the transformative power of a listener's unwavering decision to help someone to do their own thinking as pristinely as possible; to show how that decision is different, completely different, from any other a listener can make. I wanted to convey the singularity of the promise not to interrupt as the fecund key to unleashing a person's mind. I wanted to show how that promise changes everything, including coaching. I wanted to honour it.

And I wanted to explicate the nature of interruption, to demonstrate how many different kinds of interruption there are and how they stalk us and seduce us and send us into practices that look marvellous but often barely touch the surface of what the human mind can do. I also wanted to show the link between interruption and societal polarisation and to speculate about a road to understanding and healing in our world.

I think it's hard for professionals to make and keep the promise not to interrupt because we have been taught, advised and paid not to. Lore and learning are hard to undo. And so we really do assume that our offerings, which truly are valuable, have to enter the minute they knock, that they will always in any given moment be of more value than the next unthought thought of the client. We assume our insights will languish if we wait until we are invited to offer them. Because of what we believe to be the expertise of our attention, we do not really, really, really think the client can produce something more valuable than we can produce for them with our words. And

nothing in our world gives us incentive to take that risk.

It is then exhilarating for us as professional listeners when we do take the risk. We often see before us beauty we did not know was possible.

CM: *You are best known for bringing us the idea and practice of creating a **Thinking Environment**[®], which you have described as a way of being rather than a way of doing. You have observed that everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first, and raised the question of how then we create the conditions for people to think well for and as themselves. Over time, you identified 10 behaviours, the 'Ten Components', which together create the conditions that support the independent thinking of individuals, groups and teams. Many people have subsequently learned the process and practice of being Thinking Environment partners, coaches, group facilitators and teachers. It has transformed leaders and organisations. Tell us more about the nature of a Thinking Environment.*

NK: I think of those two words in two ways. In lower case, they mean the unconscious ways we inherently behave with each other in order to think for ourselves. In upper case, they mean a consciously constructed system of behaviour that approximates those inherent conditions for independent thinking. In other words, the Thinking Environment is our best guess about what a thinking environment is.

What matters in this distinction is that the Thinking Environment has sprung from the observation of a thinking environment. The Thinking Environment is not a made-up model or framework. It is an ever-surfacing result of noticing what is happening when people are thinking well and seamlessly for

themselves and what is happening when they are not. Studying those observations, we have been able to identify the likely key behaviours that produce independent thinking. They have become known as the Thinking Environment. But they are really an expression, I think, of what the mind does naturally when it thinks for itself.

So, you might wonder why we have to do this. If a thinking environment is so natural, why don't we just do it all the time? Why do we need a consciously constructed, capital-letters version? Because much of society fervently opposes independent thinking. And so it makes sure we don't have the conditions to produce it. Even as listening professionals, we learn how to block a thinking environment, how to corrupt it, how to disparage it. As therapeutic professionals, we are often taught to think for our clients and how to disguise that with 'killer' questions. We think our clients are paying for that. And so do they.

Independent thinking is, therefore, interrupted most of the time. We do know inherently how to get it going again. But we have been meticulously schooled away from knowing that we know it. When we do it by chance, we are thrilled. But we don't know how to do it again and again. Because we don't understand it.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett expressed this phenomenon beautifully when he said about evolution itself: 'There is such a thing as competence without comprehension.'¹ But now we can become competent at creating thinking environments for our clients because we finally do have some comprehension of them. We have this working approximation we call the Thinking Environment. And that means, thankfully, we no longer have to be as hit-and-miss as evolution.

CM: *What has been the path of its development?*

NK: As the coaching world began to develop, so did its interest in the Thinking Environment. I was a bit surprised when I was asked to speak at a coaching conference in 2004. I had not realised that those early promoters of coaching wanted coaching to be an experience of independent thinking. And, of course, I agreed with them that, if coaching should be anything, it surely should be an engagement that frees the mind of the client fully. ▶

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Over time, my consultancy, Time To Think, began to construct its own view of coaching in which the 'Thinking Session' is the core methodology - although that term slightly grates because I see this process not as a methodology, but as a way of being that liberates the human mind. And soon we developed Time To Think coaching courses and qualifications. This development continues to be rich and instructive.

Along the way, while I was engrossed in the one-to-one power of a Thinking Environment, Christopher Spence, founder of the London Lighthouse, was applying the Thinking Environment components to meetings, with staggering results. As I began to tell my clients and students about those results, most of whom were working inside organisations and drowning in meetings, they asked to learn the group applications. Soon 'Transforming Meetings' was born and people qualified as Time To Think facilitators.

Also, if I could just add here that organisations and the systems that underpin them have languished in non-thinking environments for decades. But, more desperately than ever, leaders and organisations need a way of operating, a new culture that produces and harvests the very best thinking from all stakeholders. The health of our planet depends on it.

CM: *At this time, we are witnessing the profound impacts of the Black Lives Matter movement as it shines a powerful light on more of the racism threaded through our societies. Other movements continue to raise awareness of other kinds of unconscious and other kinds of prejudice and discrimination. Sometimes it feels like there is real hope for change, particularly through the*

disruption of this COVID-19 period, but at other times the weight of oppression seems to be getting heavier. I know that you were inspired by finding out about an event in your father's life when he was young and had the courage to speak out. What is the contribution that the Thinking Environment can make to equality and social justice?

NK: This question keeps me awake at night and fuels my days. Thank you for asking it. And for mentioning my father. His stance, as a 17-year-old, against racism in 1920 in Tennessee did shape my life. One of the 10 components of a Thinking Environment is 'equality'. Another is 'difference'. They are there because we find that, in order for us to think for ourselves, we have to think as ourselves. And that requires the listener to hold bias-free respect for us, seeing us as equal thinkers.

And that requires the dismantling of what I think is the key assumption holding racism and most other forms of societal bias in place: 'They cannot think.' To subjugate a group of people, the first and key thing to do is to convince them and the world that they lack intelligence and cannot think, and that the dominant group will think for them. 'They cannot think' is the scaffolding. The expressions of that untrue assumption become the infrastructure - stereotypes, social segregation, interlocking institutional and legal forms of oppression. It all starts, I think, with the internalised assumption that people like 'them' can't think.

A Thinking Environment challenges that. We think as equals. We take equal time, give equal turns, generate equally generative attention for each other, appreciate each other equally, allow each other's feelings equally and refuse to compete with each other. We are finding that in a true Thinking Environment racism can begin to die. And fresh thinking about our institutions can emerge. True inclusion, not just diversity, can take root.

CM: *Listening to a recent online panel of leaders facilitated by author and keynote speaker Margaret Heffernan, I was struck by their realisation that what is most needed now is what they termed either compassionate or empathic leadership. What can the*

Thinking Environment offer to leaders as they seek to navigate out of the pandemic and into the future?

NK: Margaret Heffernan is one of my heroes. I champion her championing of compassion and empathy in leadership. Compassion and empathy are the emotional sinew of a Thinking Environment. They also are its product. They are thinking enhancers. They ignite independent thinking. That is why the Time To Think strap line is 'Leadership for a Thinking Environment'. Once a leader decides to lead for a Thinking Environment, they have committed themselves to compassion and empathy. That is also why a Thinking Environment is anathema for autocratic and narcissistic leaders. It has been the enlightened, empathic leaders who have made the Thinking Environment the culture of their teams and companies and their coaching programmes.

And in this troubling COVID time, if we need only one thing in leadership, it is surely fresh, independent thinking born of compassion and empathy. So I would say to leaders at this time that one of the most effective forces out of this pandemic is to make a Thinking Environment the culture of their leadership, and especially to have the daily resource of it for themselves.

CM: *The Incisive Question is a key part of the application of a Thinking Environment. Why is it also the only type of question that is included in the 'Ten Components'?*

NK: That question is entirely different from any other. Other questions are powerful, too - some are life-changing, and the very idea of a question is in itself a wonderful thing. In fact, it is commonly said among scientists that science is not looking for a better idea; it is looking for a better question. The mind just does love questions.

But this one, this one is music. It takes easily 7,000 words to do it justice. So, one day, I thought I would see if I could get its essence into one sentence. Here's what I settled on: An Incisive Question uses a hypothetical construct ('If you knew..., how would you...?') to replace an untrue limiting assumption with a true liberating one and connect it to a person's 'goal'.

When we ask it, it seems so simple. But it is loaded with complexity, particularly the

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journey to it. To get to that gem, the mind seems to ask itself any of 15 other questions.

I think that the human mind takes that journey and constructs Incisive Questions in a flash as it breaks through spontaneously to a new idea. If you listen closely, you can usually 'see' that journey in the 'footprints' of a person's thinking, when they go from block to breakthrough. Sometimes the person actually says an Incisive Question out loud. 'If I knew that I am at least as valuable as he is, how would I approach this?', or 'If I knew that I can manage whatever fallout might ensue, what would I say to her?'

In just three short parts, this kind of question establishes a state of play in the brain by using the subjunctive tense as the 'bookends' and the chosen tense of the liberating assumption as the 'book'. It also embeds the liberating assumption as no 'affirmation' or 'direction' can. I think the mind loves this construction because the brain likes to play, not to obey. Even when it is considering a truth.

CM: *What are you learning in this work-from-home period about the difference between in person and on-screen Thinking Environments?*

NK: Lots. And lots that for a while mystified me. For nearly three months, I couldn't figure it out. We were getting responses to on-screen Thinking Environment sessions and meetings that can only be described as rapturous. And that shouldn't be happening. Platforms like Zoom are inherently interruptive. In major and subtle ways, we are interrupted over and over again online, including by the threat of interruption. This means that the vital promise of no interruption is broken time and time again. So why the rapture?

At first I thought it was because, sadly, many people's on-screen experience of a Thinking Environment is richer than their in-person experience of life. So I figured it was the contrast that was producing the ecstasy. I also thought it might be because most of the people giving the feedback had experienced an in-person Thinking Environment before. But that was not true.

Then I could see it. The promise of no interruption was being broken, yes, but not by the listener. It was being broken by the platform. And it is the human promise, the listener's promise, that penetrates and ignites the thinker's mind. It is the thinker's trust in that human promise that allows them to claim their own intelligence and fly. When the platform interrupts, nothing changes inside the thinker's relationship with the listener. And so the minute the platform interruption abates, the Thinker reconnects to the listener and their catalytic promise. Thinking resumes. Both parties continue to be, enriched, liberated, launched. Rapturous.

That is not to say that the platform's interruption is negligible or fine. It's not. It does stop the flow of thinking, and we can never recover the lost thoughts. We cannot dismiss that loss. Also, in person, where the room can keep the promise of no interruption, something additional happens, something whose biology we will, I'm sure, understand one day. Some kind of 'connective tissue' is possible in person that can never be achieved on screen. There is a different wellspring of some kind that produces genius we cannot get without being in the same physical room.

And all of this means that in-person Thinking Environments are preferable to on-screen ones. Nevertheless, these two universes sit side by side beautifully. And for now, until in-person is truly (not just politically or economically) safe, the on-screen world is our saviour. And in the future, we can choose, sober about what we sacrifice, weighing it all up. In the meantime, we get to become resplendently good at being a thinking environment and creating Thinking Environments on screen. And we get to keep sharing our learning.

When we are in person again, and the people who have known a Thinking Environment only on screen get to experience this bliss in person, it is likely to be dazzling for them. We may need a new word for rapture. ■



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About Nancy Kline

Nancy has spent the last three decades researching independent thinking and the barriers that prevent us from thinking for ourselves. She presents her ideas in her best-selling books, *Time to Think*, *More Time to Think* (Cassell) and, most recently, *The Promise That Changes Everything* (Penguin Life). She is founding director of Time To Think, a global leadership development and coaching company, and is both a coach and a teacher of Thinking Environment courses. She also is Visiting Faculty at Henley Centre for Coaching, Henley Business School, UK. Born and raised in New Mexico, Nancy lives in Oxfordshire with her English husband, Christopher Spence.



About the interviewer

Carolyn Mumby is a coach-therapist, supervisor and trainer in private practice in London and the Chair of BACP Coaching. She is a registered Time to Think facilitator and coach.
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