

Developing **Leaders**

Executive Education in Practice

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New Pathways for Executive Development

By Linda Aspey

In the ongoing search for ways to help leaders and managers to initiate and manage change, some may feel that there is little that is new out there. But just once in a while, something comes along that has the potential to reshape the way we think and how we work as development professionals.

Thinking “Conditions” not Interventions

One significant example of this is the work of Nancy Kline from *Time to Think*, who believes that human beings can, by creating the right *conditions* rather than making *interventions*, help others to be self-directed, generate ideas, solve problems and make decisions. Over years of working with and studying people, Nancy developed the concept of “The Thinking Environment™”, identifying what she calls “Ten Components” – elements and behaviours that individually and collectively appear to have an impact on people’s ability to think well for themselves without being directed or told what to think.

When change is afoot, this is one of the key things we need our leaders to do – and in turn what our leaders need to help others to do - to think for themselves. Naturally they also need to build relationships and a host of task related things; all require skilful and often independent thinking. The emerging science of neuro-leadership - the application of findings from neuroscience to the field of leadership - tells us that intelligence alone is not sufficient for success; it requires a balance between the cognitive and emotional dimensions of our minds.

At the heart of the Thinking Environment is the component of “Attention”. It involves a “listener” asking a “thinker” what they would like to think about, then giving the thinker intense, uninterrupted, respectful, fascinated, sustained and silent attention. All the time they keep their eyes on the eyes of the thinker whilst that person articulates their thoughts or mulls them over silently; the thinker can look away if they wish but the listener focuses on them.

As unnerving as this may sound, provided both have agreed to engage thus it seems to yield remarkable results. As independent thinking progresses it seems to parallel what one might do in traditional coaching – reflecting, making connections, surfacing and correcting erroneous assumptions, generating ideas, articulating feelings, setting goals, achieving breakthroughs. Yet unlike traditional coaching there are few questions except occasionally asking, “What more do you think, feel or want to say?” which prompts a new wave of thinking. When the thinker has finally finished, they are often eager to leave and implement their decisions, or if required, the listener can ask - using exactly the thinker’s own words – questions that help them to tackle remaining assumptions so they reach a final - and often significant - outcome.

The other nine components support the “Attention” component and include “Ease”, “Equality” and “Appreciation”, all of which sound quite gentle and yet the results are powerful. And whilst other older and well practiced approaches such as meditation or mindfulness share some of the principles of the Thinking Environment, these are usually



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solitary exercises and appear to result in gradual change rather than significant shifts as can happen from the fascinated, attentive presence of another.

The Thinking Environment is more than active listening and more than the thinker simply downloading – it feels as if it is really “igniting their thinking”. And in my experience decisions made in a thinking session – whether 1:1 or in teams - are highly likely to be implemented.

However, quite how and why this worked was not clear and most evidence purely anecdotal – until recently.

Our connected and resonant brains

Since Nancy Kline's first book on the subject, “Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind”, advances in neuroscience are offering us new insight into what may be happening in the brain under these conditions.

We now know that our brains and nervous systems are not insular or fully self contained but are profoundly affected by the brains and nervous systems of those around us through a finely balanced communication loop. This starts before birth in utero when the mother and foetus are biologically intertwined (a rather worrying thought in itself when we consider the impact that maternal stress might have on the developing foetal brain). Then from birth onwards, if we are fortunate, our mother detects our emotions instinctively, such as the level of relational empathy and attunement, soothing us and making us feel safe when we feel anxiety or pain.

Lewis, Amini and Lannon in “A General Theory of Love” (2001), coined the term “limbic resonance” for this, whereby the limbic brain (one of the 3 brains that make up the whole brain – the limbic being responsible for holding memory and processing emotions) of one person is delicately attuned to the internal state of another. “Limbic resonance” is something we achieve when we are resonant with another, reading their emotions, detecting how they are feeling and even sensing what they will do next, as they read ours and hopefully meet our needs too. Emotions are a product of the brain, body and heart acting in unison, as if in a dance. Through advances in neurocardiology we can observe how emotion affects both heart and brain synchronously, decreasing or increasing stress and energy levels. The *HeartMath Institute* calls it the “heart brain”, working together in a state of optimal clarity, perception and performance. Interestingly, “appreciation” is of particular significance in developing a coherent heartbrain.

Moreover, limbic resonance seems key to physically *shaping* the baby's brain by forging “neural pathways”. These are the routes to just about everything we need – unconsciously and consciously - from digesting our food through to having a conversation. When our senses are stimulated by the baby's needs, our hormones and neurotransmitters are stimulated, sending out signals that stimulate the same in the baby, who probably does the same back to us, building a bond of mutual care – and building new neural pathways.

We build or strengthen emotional neural pathways as we mature, tuning in and developing relationships. How successful we are depends on a number of factors, particularly significantly the conditions in which we were raised – physiological, biological and emotional.

The Importance of Developing Trust from Infancy to Adulthood

The human infant (and most mammals) depends on the carer for survival and safety as it cannot manage these for itself nor develop healthily under conditions of constant anxiety. So it must learn to trust. One mechanism that probably assists is “attachment”. Early pioneers in attachment theory, particularly John Bowlby, recognised the importance of a close relationship (primarily maternal) in creating safety. The devastating effects of emotional deprivation are all too painful a proof that without emotional nurturance children will not thrive and may even die – even if well fed. You can see attachment theory at play in many relationships. The abandoned duckling that gets adopted by a maternal dog. The cat that looks deeply and lovingly into the eyes of its owner, who looks back with equal love. They are feeding each other's brains and bathing them with oxytocin, which creates feelings of attachment, safety and well being.

Ask any engaged but underpaid employee why they stick at their job and a good relationship with their manager is very likely to feature in their answer. They may not be in love but there are certainly likely to be feelings of attachment and trust. And many therapists will tell you that irrespective of their theoretical framework they instinctively know that it is the *relationship* they co-create with the client that makes change and growth possible.

Can Adults Really Develop New Ways of Thinking?

So what does all of this mean for leadership development?

Well, if we don't use neural pathways much they become forgotten, particularly it seems, the emotional ones. In some ways the brain is efficiently lazy and it will follow established pathways if it can find them. But the brain does not, as we used to think, stop developing beyond a certain age – it still has the quality of “plasticity” almost until the day we die, unless there is degenerative disease. We can, with effort, develop existing or new neural pathways that expand our ability to feel, think and respond. As Lewis et al said, “Psychotherapy changes people because one mammal can restructure the limbic brain of another”.

We have known for some time of the existence of the amygdala (first brought to the wider non scientific audience by Daniel Goleman in his work on emotional intelligence) the two small areas of the limbic brain associated with memory and the emotions that cause us either to **approach** or **avoid**. Fear, anger, disgust, shame and sadness are the avoid emotions (driven by the “survive” need – threat avoidance, defensiveness, attack); and love/trust, joy/excitement by the “thrive” need – relate, create, enjoy). We can now measure the biochemistry of the brain under conditions which create these emotions and even see them through Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) – with startling clarity. We see neural connections creating pathways for new behaviour and see that the more often we experience something, the stronger those pathways become, whether the path is one that leads us to avoid or to approach.

Neuroscience in the Boardroom?

Many of these concepts discussed here feel alien to organisational life. Limbic resonance? Attachment? Love? Ease? Attention? Appreciation? For some they go beyond touchy feely, into the realms of plain weird. I can almost feel some readers' toes curl at the idea



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of suggesting that the senior team start to practice sustained eye contact or give explicit appreciation on a daily basis. The process of Appreciative Enquiry, a powerful change management tool, has begun to introduce some of these ideas into organisations, yet is not still not widely accepted as of value.

However these concepts certainly give us a new perspective on how we might grow the thinking and other capabilities of our leaders, and how they in turn might do the same for those who follow them. If humans flourish best when we reduce the factors that lead to avoidance and increase the factors that lead to approach, what can we do? Perhaps we may need to rethink the way we approach executive and indeed organisational development and think of it as creating the right conditions rather than making interventions. This is nothing new in itself – we know how critical organisational culture is to success or failure. And yet time and time again even cultural change programmes fail, organisational or personal change is short lived and not always successful.

Perhaps we have been focusing too much on the end goal rather than the felt process of change and the creation of *genuinely* trusting relationships . Clearly, the development of the brain and its complex neural pathways takes time. It is a conscious and an unconscious process and to be successful, needs to be intense and repetitious, and when appropriate, rewarded with good feelings hence repeated.

A New Approach to Survive and Thrive

David Rock's work on "brain based coaching" and Dr Dan Siegel's work on interpersonal neurobiology have brought various strands together to make this come alive for us. In particular, Rock's "SCARF" model offers a simple and highly versatile framework to consider the approach or avoid paradigm. SCARF stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness - I've used this model in numerous ways including helping executives to consider positive and negative applications of change, for example how they will introduce change or in increasing self awareness when faced themselves with personal change, and have been struck by its ability to get to the very heart of the issues that could result in derailment or success.

If limbic resonance is key how can we create the optimal learning conditions that create conditions where people can think well for themselves? Here are just a few ways at the relationship and wider levels that can make that happen.

- **Skilled Listening.** Firstly, they need people around who are willing to *actively* help them to generate thinking. We all have a part to play in that. We can listen. We can wait for people to share their thoughts, not patiently but expectantly (there is a difference). We can hold back on offering our own ideas until we are sure that they have really reached the limits of their own thinking. And then ask ourselves, “Can they go even further in their own thinking before I offer mine?”
- **Equality.** We can acknowledge that competition is healthy but it has a limited place in generating new thinking from everyone because whilst some see competition as something to approach, others see it as something to avoid. Everyone’s voice matters.
- **Appreciation.** We can appreciate each other verbally and with our actions – and this is not just creating a warm fuzzy (or for some, uncomfortable) feeling it means being absolutely explicit and genuine in saying what we appreciate about someone else, and helping people to feel comfortable with accepting the appreciation so they in turn can appreciate others.
- **Generative Questions.** We can limit our questions to those which really help the thinker, rather than asking the ones we most want to ask. We can ask them in a way that challenges - without humiliating or telling them that we already have an answer - to think afresh about what they may be assuming or avoiding. Kline calls these Incisive Questions™.

In coaching it means that the coach must learn to stop asking question after question, and instead give the client time the space, respect and fascinated attention to hear what they are saying and, importantly, what they will say next, without being led by the coach with another question.

In teams and organisations it means ensuring that everyone has a turn to speak if they want to, without ridicule, and asking ourselves constantly, “how are we helping each other to think well without directing their thinking or doing their thinking for them?”

In developing our leaders it means encouraging them to address the same questions for their people so they can ask themselves – “what am I doing right now that is helping the people around me do *their* very best thinking?”

In all development planning – when searching for suitable executive development providers, planning your training offerings for the year ahead, selecting coaches for your organization, or even planning a coaching session with one of your executives, I'd venture that it could be useful to ask yourself – “how will this intervention create the right conditions that will help them to do their own very best thinking so they can achieve impactful *and* sustained change?”

Conclusion

How can executives create followership? Or be decisive when swimming in a sea of uncertainty? We need to help them to create synchronicity in themselves and with others. The pathways and connections we have forged since before birth and beyond have shaped our ability to think and act and build relationships. If executive development can partly emulate what our earlier formative years did (or should have done) for us, perhaps it can create new pathways to help them to deal with evermore challenging situations.



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For a fully referenced version of this article go to http://www.iedp.com/time_for_a_rethink

Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

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