



THINKING WELL TOGETHER

7 actions you can take to promote better thinking

1. Share the way you're thinking about an issue and invite others to do the same.
2. Clarify meaning, and address any misunderstandings quickly and early.
3. Ask people to inquire about others' perspectives, rather than simply advocating for their own.
4. Encourage dissent, doubt and challenge.
5. Develop the skills a team needs to manage disagreement well. This will ensure you minimise interpersonal risk and maximise the business advantage of multiple alternatives.
6. Ensure everyone participates and contributes by monitoring how turns to speak are taken.
7. Actively promote the business benefits of thinking well together by equipping team members with the communication skills and thinking techniques that support collaboration.

Meetings as a core business activity

For the last 20 years, we've been analysing meetings. Why? Because it turns out meetings matter - a great deal! Our research has shown that meetings are the lifeblood of every organisation in a knowledge economy. Meetings are where problems are solved, decisions made and actions determined. In a fundamental sense, organisations are talked into being during regular meetings, formal and informal, and business success is powerfully influenced by the quality of the talk that goes on in meetings.

But so many of the meetings that we've observed produce very little, despite all the time and effort put into them. What about you? What percentage of last week did you spend in meetings of one kind or another? And, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the extent to which your time was well spent?

Individual vs collective thinking

The challenge at the core is this: thinking alone is hard enough, but thinking together can be very demanding indeed! Yet, this is exactly the skill needed, if a team is to make headway on the complicated (and at times complex) issues before it. Each person attending a meeting tends to feel more comfortable thinking alone, rather than in concert with colleagues. But this is no longer adequate. Typical problems today are too multifaceted, the interdependencies too intricate, and the implications too serious. Human beings everywhere, whatever their country or sector, are increasingly forced to develop their capacity to think together and take coordinated actions. In fact, one of the most important skills required of a 21st-century leader is the ability to create rich conversations. Organisations can be thought of as networks of conversation.

Unfortunately, many of these important conversations lapse into unproductive debate - the root of this word means 'to beat down'! In a debate, there's a winning side and a losing side. Parties generally maintain their original certainties and deeper, more open enquiry is suppressed. Collective intelligence and fresh ideas are stifled by the relentless to-and-fro of attack and defence. Typically, just a few of those present tend to dominate the airtime. Many say little or nothing. Some, we know, even daydream or mentally get on with some other task! In the worst cases, meetings are rife with competitive antagonisms and cabaret performances, ego vs. ego. Sound familiar?

The need for a decision is often a meeting's rationale

Studies of the decisions people make and the outcomes of these decisions show that the track record of most teams is not very impressive. Yet it's been shown that people go ahead and decide anyway. Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel prize-winning economist,

confirms this point. "A remarkable aspect of your mental life is that you're rarely stumped!" We tend to form quick opinions and swift conclusions about almost everything that comes our way. We decide what we think of someone before we know much about them. We trust or distrust a stranger, without being able to articulate our reasons. And, in our business lives, we can take a decision without much enquiry. Kahneman points out that the cause of this very human tendency is that we often place too much stress on the information in front of our noses, while failing to consider all that may be slightly off to the periphery of our vision. We stick to whatever is currently in our spotlight and fail to look beyond.

Team decision-making is frequently flawed

A McKinsey study asked 2,000 executives to assess recent decisions in their organisations. Only 28% reported that the quality of decisions in their companies was generally good. 60% of them reported that bad decisions occurred just as often as good ones. In fact, study after study has shown that a wide range of cognitive biases can distort our thinking and lead to poor quality decisions. It's fair to say that there is now much more awareness of the effects these biases can have on team thinking. But awareness alone does not minimise their impact. You need the particular skills, techniques and processes that promote the rich conversations where high quality thinking flourishes.

Without a sound process, more analysis is not the answer

Researchers investigated more than 1000 business decisions over five years, logging both *how* each decision was reached and what the outcomes were. All the decisions concerned significant issues, such as entering a new market, making an acquisition, launching a new service or product, or changing the organisational structure. It seemed most teams did conduct some sort of analysis. For instance, analysts had often drawn up detailed models and presented these back to the senior decision-making team, as part of a data gathering phase. But, overall, they found that the quality of the process mattered more than analysis by a factor of six. For example, did the team mobilise diverse cognitive toolkits and did they promote contradiction and challenge? Even superb analysis proved useless without a robust process.

Meetings are where thinking well together matters most, since professionals across all sectors are, essentially, paid to make good quality decisions. Being an *individually* intelligent, confident and articulate team member is no longer enough. You have to be able to think *along with* your colleagues, given the complicated - and often complex - nature of work today. And for this, you need to embed in your regular meetings the specific skills and techniques that support thinking as a team activity!