

# Time to think: Listening to ignite the human mind

**Nancy Kline**

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*Review by Dominik Godat*

“**M**ost people think they listen well, but they rarely do – not at this level. Listening this way is a radical act. (...) Whether you want to have more productive meetings, solve business problems, create bold strategies or build stronger relationships, this book offers you a new world of possibilities.”

This quote from the book jacket is, for once, a promo blurb that understates the content of this book, especially the usefulness for solution focused practitioners. Although this book is neither written with the aim of being solution focused (SF) nor especially for coaches or facilitators, many of the findings are perfectly in line with the SF approach and have the potential to complement the way you coach or facilitate in the future.

“Are you listening well enough to your clients? Are you really listening in a way that ignites their minds? Are you creating a thinking environment for your clients?” Before Ernst Bechinie, a fellow SF coach, asked me these three questions, I thought that I was a good listener. But the more I reflected on this, I realised that in my coachings my focus is more on asking the right questions than on the listening. I have seen how SF questions can ignite the minds of my clients, but how could it be possible to reach this only by listening? And what is a thinking environment? To find out, I knew that I had to read this book.

In “Time to think” Nancy Kline builds on the well known assumption that the brain that contains the problem also

contains the solution. To seek out the solution, the thing that this person needs the most is time to think in a special environment that enhances thinking. In the first section she therefore sets out the ten components that lead to the Thinking Environment. Although many of those might sound familiar, like giving attention, appreciation, encouragement, or ease, Kline manages to highlight small but very important details on the one hand. On the other hand she points out the importance of creating an environment where thinking can take place in its full beauty. It might be as important to listen the right way as to ask the right questions. Have you lately, for example, asked the next SF question while your client was quiet? Did you really know if her thinking process was finished? Or did your question interrupt her solution thinking? Even though she was quiet, she might have thought about possible solutions without saying anything. How can you create a physical environment that says back to people, you matter? Or how do you show your fascination with your body language? In this first section you find many little hints in this direction. If you do not read beyond this first section, you will have had a stimulating exposition of how you can be a more effective listener. But this book is not only about listening, it is also about how to help your clients to think creatively, powerfully and beautifully. Isn't that also what we aim to do as SF practitioners?

The beginning of the second section shows how the ten components of the Thinking Environment can be applied in a variety of work, personal and coaching settings to enable others to think effectively. This variety of applications might be fascinating for SF coaches, facilitators, and practitioners from other SF disciplines. The main focus of this section, however, lies in the thinking partnership, the appliance of the principles of the Thinking Environment with a clearly defined procedure to think in pairs. Kline describes in a fascinating way a sample thinking session and its positive effects.

Sections four and five illustrate how this approach could change society and encourages us to think about our future. Kline also proposes some radical changes to traditional work

and societal ethics. The removal of competition from the workplace is one such change. Furthermore, she urges us to focus on finding a good idea, not on winning when we engage in conversation and discussion with others. Even though these parts were fun to read, they were not as relevant to me as an SF coach and facilitator as the first two sections.

Nancy Kline has spent fifteen years developing this approach. This experience, her setbacks and breakthroughs, are present in every page of this book. The whole book is easy to read and full of examples, sample dialogues, and stories of thinking sessions. Her approach is simple to understand, but the small and very relevant details that matter are challenging and not that easy to apply. It might take some time and practice to really master them.

The thing that wasn't in line with my SF thinking in the beginning was her proposal to ask incisive questions. Incisive questions are designed to remove the limiting assumptions that block the thinking process. What I don't like about this idea is the clear focus on limitations. Nevertheless, I wanted to try it out and was surprised how good her incisive questions work to stimulate the thinking process of my clients. But this didn't satisfy me. Then one day a thought struck me. Since the idea of asking questions that change the focus of the clients to a direction where they can think more productively is what we are used to doing, SF questions work as incisive questions as well.

After I read the book, I couldn't wait to put some of the principles of the Thinking Environment into practice in my own coaching and facilitation sessions. Again and again, I am fascinated to see what a difference they make – and yes, listening the right way can ignite the human mind.

Even though Nancy Kline's approach differs in some parts from the SF approach, many things are similar and complement each other beautifully, often with a slightly different focus. And this offers a lot of learning potential. So, if you are great at asking the right questions, but want to focus on the listening as well to create an SF time to think for your clients, this book might be right for you.

Am I listening well enough to my clients? Am I really listening in a way that ignites their minds? Am I creating a thinking environment for my clients? Yes, now I think I am!

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