

HOW TO LISTEN SO PEOPLE CAN THINK



*'This stunning book
is a joyous, life-changing
experience of the power
of a Thinking Environment.'*
~ Nancy Kline

MONICA SCHÜLDT

How to Listen So People Can Think

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The Power of a Thinking Environment®

Monica Schüldt

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*For Nancy,
Who has dedicated her life to this noble quest:
To enable people to think for themselves.*

About this book and the value of a Thinking Environment

‘I love Monica’s book! She is a wonderful storyteller, and her mastery of the Thinking Environment is inspiring.

It is such a practical book too.

The suggested exercises to try and practice – “experiment” – together with “watch out!” and “rubbish bin” all make it fresh and accessible.’

– *Fiona Dawe, CBE, Time To Think Faculty*

‘Since experiencing the Thinking Environment, I have found conventional meetings frustrating and pointless. This beautifully crafted book will help you transform meetings from battlegrounds of interruptions to safe places for co-creating meaningful ideas.’

– *Alasdair Skelton, Professor of Geochemistry
and Petrology, Stockholm University*

‘Monica has created something truly special here. This is an invitation to experience the remarkable power of generous human attention and how it frees people to think courageously for themselves.

Through authentic stories drawn from every corner of life – family

dinners and boardroom meetings, classroom moments and mentoring conversations – Monica offers us a deeper way of being with each other. Her genuine enthusiasm is contagious as she invites practical ways to make tiny shifts that create opportunities for independent thinking.

Monica playfully weaves together the profound and the accessible. She takes big ideas that could feel overwhelming and presents them with such warmth and lightness that they feel like gifts rather than lessons. Each story becomes a doorway, each practice an opportunity to discover our own capacity for generative attention.

This is a book that speaks to everyone because it honours the fundamental truth that we all long to connect more deeply, to think more freely, and to offer our attention as a form of love. Monica shows us exactly how to do that, one small, beautiful step at a time.'

– Maryse Barak, Time To Think Faculty

'Don't be fooled by how simple it is, because the simple is the ingenious and this is ingenious.'

– Anders Sundin, CEO, IT company Sokigo

'Most of the leadership teams I work with choose to use a Thinking Environment to make better decisions and manage complex issues. It helps them avoid misunderstandings and to deal with challenges more effectively.'

*– Per Malmberg, founder and CEO,
Ledarskaparna management consulting*

‘Helping your athletes grow is the foundation of leadership in sport. This book offers excellent guidance for coaches who want to support real development.’

*– Anders Emanuelson, chair of the
Swedish Multisport Federation*

‘Sport should be based on joy and inclusion, and give children real influence – principles that are easier said than done. A Thinking Environment has given me, and my part of the sports world, the tools to make that happen.’

– Katarina Eriksson, Secretary General and sports coach

‘A Thinking Environment creates inclusion, better workplaces, and better thinking. I hope many people read this book and try out a Thinking Environment for themselves.’

– Jeanette Forss, Regional Director, Unionen

‘Since we started using Thinking Sessions, we don’t need couples’ therapy or relationship courses.’

– Gunnar Wallin, happily married

‘In a Thinking Environment, brilliant, independent thinking emerges. Powerful conversations take place – where no one interrupts, and listening is at the centre.’

– Karolina Palmberg, certified ICF Coach and mother

One thousand thanks

My number one thinking partner is my husband.

When I ask for time to think, he settles in on the couch, always on the right side, puts his arm on the armrest, and gives me his full attention. Magic happens.

Most of these times, his attention enables me to work things out for myself, with no input from him. When that works, he listens and says nothing. Often it doesn't even take very long.

Bizarrely, I often don't know what I really think until I say it out loud while someone is listening. Sometimes I am surprised by what I actually think.

Every now and then, I want to know what he thinks and when I ask, he will tell me. Usually I don't need his thinking, and when I don't ask, he says nothing.

We have been partners for 33 years now, and ever since we started creating Thinking Environments, Nils has given me an average of two Thinking Sessions a week. That's a lot of Thinking Sessions, and a lot of active love.

Because of you, my life is so much better.

A thousand Thinking Sessions. Thank you.

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Introduction

This book is about the Thinking Environment®: behaviours that unleash individual and collective intelligence. Good relationships, independent thinking and far better decisions result. Not only is decision quality improved: the decisions are also more likely to be implemented.

The Thinking Environment was discovered by author and educator Nancy Kline, and is now being used all over the world. (More about Nancy Kline in Appendix 4).

As an organisational consultant and coach with 30+ years' experience of improving leadership, collaboration and communication in businesses, authorities, municipalities and non-profit organisations, I have used many methods. There is no doubt in my mind that Thinking Environment basics are the root source of the greatest successes. Groups unleash collective intelligence, save time and come to better decisions. Group members are more at ease and more engaged. People solve their own problems, even dilemmas that may have burdened them for months or even years, and find solutions to all kinds of issues, from minor annoyances to pivotal life choices. Couples find their relationship more enriching. Conflicts are settled. Young people find their voice and stand tall. Families are better off.

In a Thinking Environment, everyone gets the opportunity to think independently, to say what they really think, and to be heard and respected. In addition to all other benefits, this reduces the risk of dangerous and expensive decisions caused by people holding back what they actually think for fear of being excluded from the group.

Creating a Thinking Environment is also the only sure way I know to turn an organisation's stated values into tangible, lived, work-place reality. In the words of experienced facilitator Alf Hellström, the Thinking Environment provides the structure that creates the culture.

The Thinking Environment provides the structure that creates the culture.

Alf Hellström

New thinking and psychological safety

We live in times of great need for new thinking: from individuals, in organisations, and at the societal level. But how can we create the conditions for independent thinking?

Current research highlights psychological safety as an enabler of effective leaders and teams, but one important item is missing from articles and presentations on psychological safety: the crux of how to create it. The answers – the practical approaches – are found in a Thinking Environment.

A Thinking Environment is created by ten behaviours that give people the conditions to think for themselves, with courage, imagination, rigour and grace.

Below is a brief description of these ten behaviours.

Attention

To receive attention from others, with a promise of no interruption, is a profoundly affirmative experience. It also enables the thinker to generate and access new thinking – thinking that would otherwise not be possible.

Equality

Everyone gets the same high-quality attention, the same amount of time, and the same number of opportunities to think.

Knowing that you will have your turn engenders ease, and allows you to focus on the person currently thinking and their ideas, instead of wasting your energy on trying to figure out how to wedge your way into the conversation to make your voice heard.

Ease

Freedom from internal urgency or stress. Ease enables profound, holistic, cutting-edge thinking, that's rooted in *all* of our thinking and *all* of our creativity.

Appreciation

Giving attention to and saying what is going well gives us energy, joy and courage. Taking in what qualities others appreciate in us bolsters self-esteem.

Difference

Welcoming differences of thinking, from different people, different group affiliations and backgrounds, and from within one's self.

Feelings

Thoughts and feelings are intimately intertwined. To enable clear thinking, feelings need to be acknowledged.

Encouragement

If you stop competing and start encouraging each other instead, everyone's thinking will improve. Competition is a thought inhibitor: it makes us focus on winning over each other, instead of joining forces for the best thinking. (Query: how could 'beating each other' ever seem to be a good way to generate excellent thinking?)

Information

Good thinking requires absorbing all relevant facts – not only knowing about them, but really taking them on board. Information also includes what we deny, individually and collectively. What is true, that we pretend doesn't exist? If we recognised fully that it does exist, how would we think?

Place

A place that expresses 'You matter' enables thinking.

The mind lives in the body. To improve conditions for thinking, take good care of the body, both in the moment and longer-term.

Incisive questions

In order to think clearly, we need to replace untrue, limiting assumptions with true and liberating ones. The process looks something like this:

- ☆ What am I assuming that is stopping me from solving this?
- ☆ What could I assume instead, which I think is true and liberating, in order to solve this?
- ☆ If I knew that [the true and liberating assumption], how would I solve this?

Simple steps that make a big difference

This book offers simple steps that make a big difference.

Each chapter focuses on one aspect of a Thinking Environment, tells stories from working life and personal life, and suggests one or more experiments to try out, in order to see what difference they make.

The first chapter, 'Stop Interrupting', is fundamental to everything else. Once you have read that, explore whatever catches your interest.

I hope you enjoy the book and find value in the experiments.

Stop interrupting

Rarely do we get to finish what we are saying and thinking, and for this, we pay a high but invisible price. Interrupting drives armoured cars through thinking, damages relationships, diminishes people, and prevents clear and creative thinking.

Interruption is an act of violence.

Nancy Kline

Closer than ever

‘My partner and I are closer than ever,’ said Erica, blushing. Erica and Robert have been a couple for more than 30 years.

‘I wasn’t going to tell you,’ she continued, the fiery blush extending down her throat.

She was quiet for a while and we kept listening. We were, of course, dying to know what had happened, but we didn’t say anything and we didn’t need to, because Erica continued:

‘I stopped interrupting him.’

Now, several years later, Erica still makes an effort not to interrupt Robert. They are both happier and the relationship, which has always been good, is even better than it used to be.

Let the patient finish speaking

Doctor Staffan Wilén used to say that if you let the patient finish speaking, it will, on average, take 2.5 minutes. As a result of saying all they want to say, the patient is more likely to be correctly diagnosed and treated, is less likely to need to come back, and the doctor will be less stressed. Staffan used to teach this to medical students and then put the candidates in a role-play where one was the patient and the other was the doctor.

‘It used to take 30 seconds before the “doctor” interrupted,’ said Staffan. ‘When I asked them why they interrupted, they would say: *I thought I had all the information I needed.*’

We listen to each other

When Joakim Crafoord was Head of Radiology at Ersta Hospital in Stockholm, he and his management team decided on new ground rules.

‘We’ve created a culture of listening well to each other,’ said Joakim, ‘and if we can keep that up, we’ve achieved something really valuable.’

I was both delighted and moved by what they had managed to create.

Then I started to consider the alternative: what they were moving away from. That made it even more interesting.

‘We sit in meetings all day talking, but we don’t listen to each other.’ Sound familiar?

Why even call it a meeting, if people aren’t listening to each other? What are we all doing there anyway? Why don’t we all just go back to our desks, patients or bulldozers and do something more productive?

Attention is key

We're used to interrupting. It's part of our culture; it's how we interact with one another.

The other night I was watching an episode of a TV show on family relationships and counting the interruptions. In a single minute, the participants managed to interrupt each other eight times. Communication? I don't think so.

We all have the ability to give attention. We have it, and we can give it away. But until we give it away and notice the results, we don't fully understand what a dynamic force one person's respectful, interested attention has for another human being.

To give attention is a way of being in the world. It is something you can choose to do and something you can practice, just like some people practice running or playing the piano. When you exercise, you develop the 'muscle' to give undivided, respectful, interested, and appreciative attention.

To stop interrupting requires constant practice, and most of us never grow perfect. But it has such enormous value that it's worth working to hone your skill, every day.

Listening to reply?

There is a crucial difference between:

listening so that you can figure out what to say

and

listening so that the other person can keep thinking for themselves

They are actually not the same thing at all. And they have completely different effects.

While others are speaking, we tend to be focused on what we are going to say when it's our turn. As a result, we are not listening well, so we aren't enabling their finest thinking. Furthermore, our thinking will not be building on theirs, because we aren't paying full attention. Clearly, we are wasting time.

We also interrupt others and say what we think they are going to say – or something we think is even better.

To listen with your full attention – to stay interested because you actually want to know what the other person will soon come up with – is crucial to success with every single experiment in this book.



*To be interrupted is bad.
To get lucky and not be interrupted is better.
But to **know** we will not be interrupted
allows us truly to think for ourselves.*

Nancy Kline

Levelling up – dealing with interruption

Karl kept interrupting one of his younger colleagues on the management team. Furthermore, and in spite of clear instructions about how important it is not to interrupt and to give everyone equal time, he also took up a disproportionate amount of air space.

‘Hang on a second,’ said Diana Sendlak Brundin, who was facilitating the group.

That was all she had to say, because Karl responded immediately:

‘You think I’m talking too much.’

Diana looked at him and, based on more than 20 years’ professional experience, she decided that she would risk it.

‘Yes, I do. We’ve talked about sharing the time equally. So, in view of the component on assumptions, what do you think about yourself, that makes you think you should have more airtime than others?’

‘He went a bit stiff,’ continues Diana, ‘and so did the others. Then he started laughing. And then the others started laughing too.’

In this group, one person chose to take up more space than the others, and another chose to hold back. ‘It’s about patterns. If you don’t break up the patterns, they will stay the same,’ says Diana.

Diana is one of Sweden’s most experienced Thinking Environment facilitators. Under her direction, the group has learned the value of everyone finishing their thinking. Psychological safety has improved greatly and so has decision quality.

Most of the time, gentle ways of interrupting the interrupter are preferable. See section ‘Watch out!’ on page 69.

EXPERIMENT

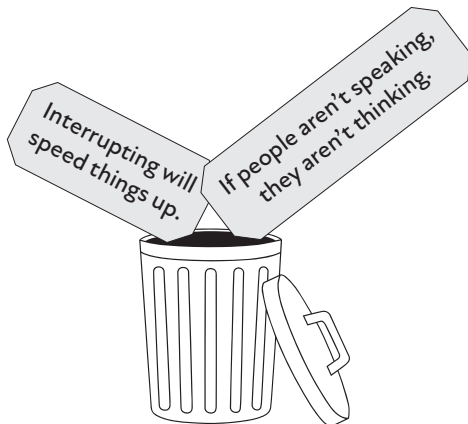


Stop interrupting. Let people finish.

Check how long you manage not to interrupt. Did you manage not to interrupt until 8 am? 9 am? If you manage to get through until lunchtime without interrupting, I'm impressed. If you can get through the whole day, let me know and I will send you a diploma.

What happens for you? How does it affect others? What happens to the quality of decisions?

Rubbish bin



The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first.

– Nancy Kline

How to Listen So People Can Think is an inspiring and practical guide to unlocking individual and collective intelligence. It highlights practices that also improve relationships, and bring pride, joy, and engagement to a wide range of contexts – from individuals and families to charitable organisations and corporations.

Based on Nancy Kline's pioneering work on the conditions in which people think for themselves – the Thinking Environment – the book proposes simple steps that make a big difference for individuals and groups.

Vivid stories about real-life implementation of a Thinking Environment make the book an easy read. Each chapter includes suggestions for simple, practical things to try out in everyday life.

A Thinking Environment is successfully enabling independent thinking all over the world.

For the past 30+ years, Monica Schüldt has helped leaders and groups to function more effectively, her clients ranging from top management to working groups and sports teams. She is co-author of the Swedish bestselling book 'Collaborator or counterlaborator'. A Cambridge University graduate, Monica Schüldt is a member of the Time To Think Global Faculty and has 15 years' experience of living and teaching the Thinking Environment.



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