

Thinking about thinking!
A draft paper - Martin Sandbrook, autumn 2000

"We'll need all of a day to think through this problem".

"A day! We can't afford that. People will start to get restless and leave at lunch. You'll have to organise the agenda so we can do it in half a day".

So runs the typical conversation when trying to organise workshop and away sessions. Even two years ago it was possible to persuade people to give up most of a day to really get their teeth into a major strategic challenge. Now it is almost impossible, especially when the occasion is going to involve external stakeholders.

What is happening to "Thinking"? In our crazy world of speed and instant solutions, when do we find time to mull over a problem - to think slowly - especially in a team setting? Why do we expect management teams to produce in a few hours solutions to the complexity of our world which are expected to last for months or years?

Perhaps we don't need to think any more. Perhaps, amongst all the e-mails, the firefights, the phone calls and the computer glitches, plans and strategies emerge on their own. Perhaps the very remorselessness of events makes taking time out to scan the horizon a wasted effort. Perhaps management teams no longer need to find time to share their visions but can rely on hidden networks to couple their minds to form coherent signals.

Perhaps! Or is this a time when thinking has never been more important? When the need to clamber up onto the bridge to scan the horizon has increased not decreased? When the need to work in step with other members of a team has become essential, not just desirable?

It may be useful to remind ourselves of the importance of "strategic" thinking. Work has become a frenetic series of activities and tasks which few people have the time to complete. Everywhere hard-pressed staff claim lack of resources as the root cause of all their problems. And, indeed, few managers seem to understand even the basics of capacity planning. But below the surface of all this activity lies another, less often asked and rarely answered question - why? Why are we doing this? What really is the purpose? What is important and what not important?

If the purpose is unclear, how can we be sure the activity is useful? How do we know what to measure to tell us whether we are succeeding? And if we are unsure about the true measures, what is the effect of the informal or arbitrary measures which are introduced as a substitute for clarity?

The task of leadership at any level - from multi-national to project team - is to be clear about purpose and the best way to achieve it - for themselves and for those they lead. In all but the most autocratic circumstances, defining these is a team task. The team will respond better if it is involved rather than told.

So there have to be times when the team gets together to ask themselves the key questions - what are we trying to achieve? what is the best way to achieve it? and how will we know we are getting there?

Answering such questions will involve some key steps - gathering information, defining the wants and needs of customers and other key stakeholders, defining results, identifying truly creative solutions

Completing these steps takes considerable thought, and thought takes time. The results need to be "robust" - justifiable, workable, realistic etc.

And if we don't do this thinking? Without the investment of thought, the pay-off is activity without focus. Few will question that if you invest time in defining purpose and making at least some sort of plan, the pay-off in terms of greater efficiency down the line will be considerable. How many people are rushing hither and thither wishing they could stop for a while to ask - why am I doing this? Is this the best way?

We also need to be aware of the importance of "thinking out of the box". The brain's very success is based on repeating learned patterns and behaviour - image having to learn to stand up every morning - but this has disadvantages. It becomes difficult to imagine different ways of doing things. De Bono goes so far as to say, unless deliberately and definitely "provoked", the mind will never be able to break out of its established way of seeing. So, in addition to taking time to plan we need also to create the conditions for creative leaps, for new ways of doing things.

But stop a minute - what do we actually mean by the term "thinking"? Perhaps one of the key reasons why so few people "stop to think" is because, if they do, nothing comes out of it. How often have we made time to consider a problem only to find that, when the space is there it seems almost impossible to hold onto what it is we are trying to "think about". Immediately, our minds seemed charmed by almost anything other than that about which we are trying to think.

In his excellent book, "Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind", Guy Claxton, in a wide ranging review of current research and theory, concludes that western thought has pretty much taken a wrong turning. We strongly favour a rational, analytical, fundamentally logical approach to thinking. This method of thinking is very linear, rooted in the logical sequencing of ideas and thoughts. But this kind of thinking rarely takes us forward in a leap of creativity. It is brilliant for logical

analysis, probably after the event, which may explain why those we admire as brilliant thinkers tend to be better at destroying an idea than creating one.

Claxton argues that in truth our thinking processes thrive on muddle, ambiguity, paradox, complexity - chaos even. Our unconscious brains are constantly making a single line of useable information for our conscious minds to walk along - a smooth (or relatively so) path emerging from the chaos of possibilities that are presented to us. We have tended to assume that this smooth line is the process of thought rather than its result. We therefore want to think in a "conscious" way whereas the real process of the brain takes place in an "unconscious", under the surface way, only feeding results to the surface when they are ready for use.

This seems to fit with what we really know about ourselves. We all recognise that habit of feeding a request into our minds and waiting for the result to emerge. Remembering names is a prime example. That name which was on "the tip of my tongue" suddenly pops into our minds unbidden at a later stage. Some kind of processing has been going on from when we first posted the request to the delivery of the answer.

Claxton's book is a fascinating read. Broadly he seems to say that if we can feed in the data - the problem, let's say - and as much relevant information as possible in support of it - for instance a range of ideas about the root causes of that problem - we can trust our minds to produce an answer. This is particularly true if the surrounding circumstances are conducive - that is, not stressed out. The secondary title of Claxton's book sums it up - intelligence increases when you think less.

Another writer, David Bohm in his book "On Creativity" argues that we need to give patient, sustained attention to the activity of confusion, rather than attempting to promote creativity directly.

Logical thinkers are uncomfortable with intuitive leaps in thinking. Claxton is saying that what may look like a jump, potentially dangerous because of its apparent lack of connection to what has gone before, is in fact the result of much unseen processing by the brain. Logic, often so unhelpful at laying a path into the unknown, is most helpful after the leap, working backwards from the intuitive jump to fill in the stepping stones to the original starting point. We can show how we got there once we have arrived but we need to trust to hidden processing to get us there in the first place.

A useful analogy is one of those 3D pictures. If the focus of your eyes is on the printed page, it looks like a scramble of coloured dots and patterns. But when you relax your eyes to focus somewhere behind the page, stop trying in fact, the dots and patterns crystallise into a 3D image. If we present the brain with all

the information needed to solve a problem and then relax the focus of our thinking, the brain will produce a result.

This gives rise to so many questions? How long does it take? How much information? What is conducive? Can we trust this process or the results? What happens when we think in a group?

If there are 2 key activities involved in creative problem solving,

- defining the problem and
- defining a solution,

this immediately suggests that we need to establish different approaches for dealing with each. So often we push for a solution immediately after having defined the problem. This allows no time for the "relaxed-focus" thinking, no time for the brain to mull over the possibilities to find its own solutions, to gestate.

1. Defining the problem

Current state - anticipated state - barriers to change - root causes

The tools for thinking in this area all already well recognised. Examples would include:

- Designing overall purpose
- Defining existing processes
- Defining stakeholder wants and needs
- Analysing root causes
- Cause and effect diagrams
- Measurement - especially using statistical techniques such as SPC
- Flowcharts / process models etc

All the above will provide information. As the amount of relevant information increases, the number of possible solutions will decrease. These solutions may not be apparent but the key purpose of this stage is to feed the brain with all the material it needs for subsequent processing.

Claxton also talks of the need for a process he calls "detection". This involves looking at the details especially those which we thought too insignificant or which would escape the notice of a cursory glance. Sherlock Holmes was the master of the significance of the small detail.

2. Creating conditions conducive to relaxed-focus thinking

The second series of activities are designed to allow the brain time for processing. Since stress and adrenalin drive blood toward the reptilian "reaction" part of our brains and therefore away from creative thought, the

purpose of these activities will be to create an atmosphere of relaxed and playful creativity.

It has long been recognised that humour generates intuitive leaps of thought - jokes often involve seeing a common set of circumstances from a new or different perspective. Equally, any activity which frees the mind from its habitual patterns should have a similar effect. There is also the theory that non-verbal and conceptual reasoning are done in the right brain whereas rational and logical reasoning, with language as its henchman, take place in the left brain. The success of many managers is rooted in their ability to think with the left sides of their brains. Activities which promote right brain thinking, even if unfamiliar and sometimes seen as "cissy", will promote creative leaps.

Almost by definition, there are few structured tools in this area. Creating mind-maps is one but this is more for capturing than generating ideas.

Ingredients for success in this gestating stage:

Methods - "focussing" (what do your guts tell you? What is your visceral response?); right brain thinking; "poetic sensibility" which involves tapping levels below the conscious including humour, theatre, word play, fun, activity and play; "mindfulness" which asks us to be aware and, if appropriate, to challenge our existing constructs since these can blind us to new perceptions

Places - comfortable, safe

Equipment - pens, paper, glue, scissors, bricks, straws, Lego

Atmosphere - free from criticism, fear. Humorous, happy, joyous even.

Music, colour

Time - as much as can be spared

Capturing results

Testing results without killing the ideas

Activities one and two will not be exclusive or sequential. It is likely that problem definition will come first but ideas will start to bubble up immediately. Even if it seems that all possible information has been collected, it will still be necessary to dip back to 1 from 2 for clarification, interpretation or to call for new information.

Pre-conditions for possible approaches to achieving the above:

Well begun is half done. To begin well means spending time - a scarce commodity. So first we need to be clear just how important it is to develop a clear strategy or a plan, to be convinced that the time invested in some quality thinking will be cost-effective.

We also need to be clear what outcomes we are looking to achieve. A sub-agenda of many management meetings is to build team effectiveness. While working on a share task is one of the best ways to achieve this, building a team does not happen by accident. If it is a desired outcome, methods for achieving it need to be built into the agenda.

This seems to give rise to 2 possible routes:

- 1. The away from it all to get a result method**
- 2. The in-office method.**

1. The away from it all to get a result method

Sometimes it may take the mind years of cogitation to solve a problem. Sometimes we just don't have that luxury.

Most often we need a result pretty quickly - a shared basis on which we can go forward and we want to combine this with building a team. Away we go for a management team away-day.

How should this be structured?

Step 1 - appoint the person who is going to facilitate the session.

Step 2 - before the away event takes place, there should be a pre-session, led by the facilitator, to:

Establish the issues

Identify the key information and data that will be required

Decide how best to make sure this information can be made available for the session

Agree the best method for achieving the desired result

Step 3 - The facilitator will create an agenda and, if possible, find out more about the people who will be attending. What are their personal visions, requirements, wants and needs.

Step 4 - The event itself

1. Assemble and break the ice

2. Sowing:

Define the issue(s)

Share and assimilate information - learn, build knowledge

Identify existing "ways we do things"

Consider the details

Examine root causes - why are things as they are?

Consider, if appropriate, the end point(s) - what do we want to be?

Where do we want to
get to?

3. Gestating:

Relax and be distracted - let the mind do the processing

Provide opportunities for play - humour, challenge, right-brain
thinking

Focus on feelings

4. Reaping:

Throw up ideas

Challenge accepted methods, behaviours, ways of doing things

Provoke but don't judge

Capture ideas - using mind-maps etc

5. Milling:

Decide on a way forward

Clarify definitions, merge ideas, agree criteria for selection,
select best options in relation to those criteria

Plan a test or pilot phase

Although set out as discrete steps, the programme may need to operate in cycles, thinking and revisiting, gestating with more sowing before reaping, reaping but returning to gestating etc.

Step 3 - Gestating - is the key difference from the way things are usually done now. The key is to avoid leaping straight to solutions without allowing adequate time for the mind to mull over the information gathered at step 2.

There are 3 critical success factors for this approach. The first is the choice of Facilitators, the second is the choice of venue, the third is the amount of uninterrupted time available.

Facilitator - needs:

- Experience of business leadership and senior management
- Ability to design an agenda
- Experience of tools and techniques
- Ability to apply tools when appropriate
- Ability to flex and change an agenda
- Understanding of inter-personal transactions and ability to respond accordingly

Venue - needs to:

- Be comfortable and private to the working team
- Offer good overnight accommodation food and drink
- Offer facilities for "play" and humour - inside and outside

Time - needs:

- To be sufficient to work through all stages of the cycle, especially the "gestation" phase
- Clear of interruptions - mobiles, e-mails, faxes, phones, visits
- To be when the team feel relaxed about what they are leaving outside, be it family of work

2. The in-office method.

It would be possible to complete all the above steps without retreating from the normal work-place. If all members of the team are in one place and can be assembled regularly, the programme can be completed in a series of short sessions.

This may be an advantage. If new information is required, it should be easy to get it. The gaps between sessions will allow time for gestation.

On the other hand, it will be more difficult to capture ideas as they arise and to subject them to development with the team. The short sessions, in the place of work, may make it difficult for participants to break away from the immediate stress and build an atmosphere of relaxation. There is less opportunity to "play" together in participative and relaxing activities. The disjointedness of the sessions may mean a lot of time is taken up coming back up to speed each time. There will be less opportunity for the team to get to know each other.

Thinking diagnosis and development

The fullest results will be obtained by fundamentally changing the whole approach to thinking in an organisation. The best learning involves a conscious recognition of what one already knows, albeit unconsciously. The first step is therefore to facilitate key influencers in an organisation to identify the advantages and disadvantages of current approaches to thinking.

Resulting from this, we can develop a programme to build on the effective and to improve on the less effective. Such a programme would involve a series of participative sessions, spread over several months, to introduce, overcome inhibition about and try out techniques such as detection, focussing, the development of poetic sensibility and mindfulness. Between sessions, these techniques can be progressively tested to evaluate their usefulness.