Thinking
caps off

What stops us from being creative at work? Unblocking the flow is simpler than you might think, if only people would listen…

WORDS **NANCY KLINE** ILLUSTRATION **ALEXANDRA LAZAR**

WHEN EASYJET TOOK TO THE skies in 1995 it had the "family" atmosphere typical of start-ups. Staff were enthusiastic and highly motivated, and the top-quality service they delivered helped to give the airline its early success. But there was concern that the stresses and strains of the company's subsequent growth would make it difficult to sustain that initial buzz.

In response, easyJet set up a "culture committee", representing staff from all parts of the business. Inspired by the body of the same name pioneered by Southwest Airlines in the US, the committee's brief was to create an environment where the entire workforce felt involved and able to contribute to the process of making easyJet a great place to work.

"Key to its functioning were the principles that all members of the committee should have equal status, and that it would be able to talk directly to any manager in the company," says independent consultant and executive coach Anne Hathaway, who was brought in to help the committee achieve its goals.

The elected members of the committee (or in some cases volunteers) represented a "diagonal slice" of the organisation, from the most junior cabin crew and reservations agents, through to pilots and senior managers. They included school leavers who had never been to a meeting before, and senior executives who were used to a leadership role. There was clearly a risk that the juniors would defer to the seniors or that the seniors would dominate and squash fledgling ideas. So the challenge was to turn this diverse group of people into a team that could think creatively as equals and come up with solutions to company-wide problems.

give value for money. In response, Hathaway introduced the culture committee to what my organisation, Time to Think, calls the "thinking environment" method.

A two-day team coaching session began with Hathaway introducing some rules. She explained that everyone would have a chance to contribute to every discussion, and asked them to listen to each other attentively – and without butting in while someone else was speaking.

Hathaway modelled this process then got people to practise the various elements of it in pairs and in the whole group, using discussion topics that were relevant to their new roles. At one point, she also asked them to deliberately interrupt each other to demonstrate how such behaviour inhibits constructive thinking and discussion. The group then held its first meeting, with Hathaway intervening whenever anyone interrupted a speaker or used the slightest pause to jump in and have their say.

"When you teach people that process they relax and don't wait for the gap because they know they will get the chance to say their piece," she says.

After just two days' training, the new committee's members were building on each other's ideas and had become confident that they could make a difference. Concrete outputs from those first two days included a list of priority actions for the coming year and an agenda for the next meeting. For some members, including managers, the experi-

Creativity is fragile if it is not given space to grow. The group needed to agree a way of working that would allow the germ of an idea to flower into definitive actions. At the same time, easyJet wanted to ensure that whatever it invested in would produce results and

ence of really being listened to and having their ideas treated with respect was a revelation that had a direct impact on the way they treated others.

Within a year the culture committee had demonstrated that it was much more than a mere talking shop. The tangible results from its work included the company's first staff attitude survey and a system for giving employees access to cheap flights, which had a positive impact on staff retention.

The senior management at easyJet quickly came to see the committee as a mechanism for getting valuable ideas from the front line, and set up other representative groups. Initially, only some of these new groups were trained in the thinking environment process, and it soon became clear that these groups were measurably more effective than those that had not received this training. The company therefore provided coaching for all the groups, which now serve as channels for two-way communication between managers and staff throughout the organisation.

One notable success was the pilots' council, where the thinking environment improved co-operation between pilots and managers. This in turn led to a review of pilots' terms and conditions, which had been causing retention problems.

The thinking environment also became the foundation of a development programme aimed at 40 senior managers in the company. In a culture where taking management development programmes is voluntary, the programme eventually ran to 11 cohorts, consisting of some 100 managers.

Six years after the culture committee first started to use the process, it continues to influence internal communication at easyJet – and contribute to high levels of performance in the face of the relentless challenges facing the airline industry.

Underlying the concept of a thinking environment is a recognition that to develop organisational effectiveness, people must be able to think for themselves – every day, at every meeting and in every interaction. But in
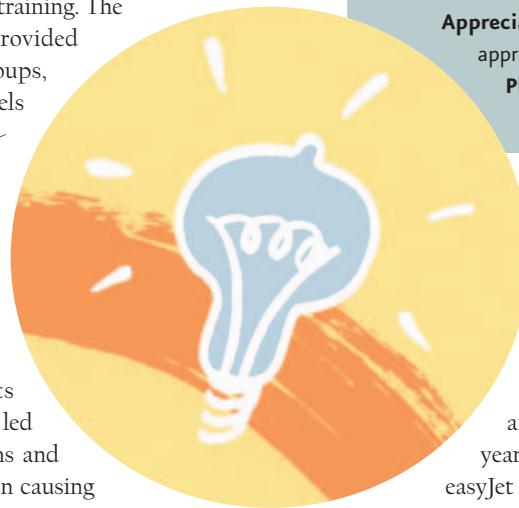
THE 10 COMPONENTS

Attention Listening with palpable respect and without interruption
Equality Giving equal turns to think and speak
Ease Offering freedom from internal urgency
Incisive Questions Finding and removing untrue assumptions that distort thinking
Information Supplying the facts and dismantling denial
Diversity Ensuring divergent thinking and diverse group identities
Encouragement Giving courage for independent thinking by removing internal competition
Feelings Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking
Appreciation Practising a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism
Place Creating a physical environment that says to people: "You matter".

People must be able to think for themselves – every day, at every meeting and in every interaction

hierarchical structures that are often driven by the alternation between reward and reprisal, what does it take for people to think clearly, rigorously and for themselves?

This question has driven the work and research of Time To Think for 30 years. The recurring answer confirms what easyJet has found – that it is not IQ, education, experience or power that enable people to think clearly and creatively. The key factor is the way they are treated by those they are with while they are thinking. The impact of our behaviour on other people's ability to think is that strong.

In the course of our work with organisations, we have identified the 10 key enablers that most improve thinking (*see panel, The 10 Components, above*). Surprisingly, perhaps, time is not one of the components of a thinking environment but a by-product of it.

In other words, time to think is generated by the key enablers. If you allot the usual amount of time for a meeting, for example, and all those present behave in these 10 ways, you will generate high-quality thinking and finish early. Finding time to think is not the point. What matters is changing the way we treat each other while we are thinking.   »

CASE STUDY: SOUTH EAST SHEFFIELD PRIMARY CARE TRUST

Senior management meetings at the sexual and reproductive health unit of the South East Sheffield Primary Care Trust used to go on for about three hours. Most of this time was taken up with the clinical consultant who headed the unit giving out information about budgets and policies. "Very few decisions were ever made. The mood was hostile and unhelpful and people always left the meeting feeling disempowered," recalls service manager Pat Carr.

Carr once worked out that for a three-hour meeting attended by 12 senior medical and administrative staff the cost was £480. So when the consultant was replaced a few years ago, she and her colleagues looked at other decision-making methods and introduced the thinking environment process.

Members of the management team now take it in turns to chair the weekly meetings, which have become much more democratic, as well as considerably shorter. Whoever is chairing the meeting will start by going round the table to ask people to say what success they are having in their work.

The person who has proposed each agenda item will then present it before asking colleagues for their first thoughts. Finally, the item is opened up for debate, at the end of which the chair summarises the outcome.

"When we get into a debate that's not getting anywhere we use incisive questions to identify what is limiting our thinking," says Carr.

She gives the example of a discussion about a new appointments system. If this seems to be hitting a brick wall, someone might say: "What are we assuming about this situation that is limiting our thinking?" The answer could be: "We are assuming that the nurses will sabotage the new system because they don't think it will work. But if we knew that the nurses wouldn't sabotage it, what would we do?" That second question usually succeeds in liberating the group's thinking.

Everyone at the meetings understands that they must give their full attention to whoever is speaking – and on no account interrupt.

"It works because everyone has an opportunity to have that thinking time," says Carr, who reckons that this process has increased the number of quality decisions from at most two per meeting to around 10.

"We reduced the unit cost of our decisions from £240 to £48 per decision and we also improved the effectiveness of our work together," she says. "We have become a more positive and proactive group."

Pat Carr is now an organisational development consultant. She can be contacted on patcarr@spiritconsultancy.com

So when would an organisation apply the 10 components? A more apt question might be: when would it not apply them? When would any organisation not want to grow and harvest the best ideas? All organisations say they want to release people's best contribution and I have never come across any that would choose to settle for mediocre ideas and demotivated workers.

It follows, then, that the thinking environment can be productively applied to any moment when human beings are communicating. To date we have found no human interaction (apart from those concerned with indoctrinating people or exacting their obedience) that cannot be improved dramatically by setting up a thinking environment as its infrastructure. This is particularly true of meetings, both face-to-face and virtual.

Meetings that take place in a thinking environment are a microcosm of corporate values in action. They are based on a decision not to meet unless everyone's thinking is going to be sought, and to create the best possible conditions for thinking.

I have never come across an organisation that would choose to settle for mediocre ideas and demotivated workers

Turning an organisation into a thinking environment happens most successfully in the following five stages:

1. The question: First, leaders are asked: do you want people to think for themselves?

2. Learning: When the answer is "yes", teams learn the 10 components, practising them in results-driven, real-time interactions and meetings.

3. Development: Coached teams apply the process.

4. Assessment: The impact of this process is assessed.

5. Expansion: The thinking environment is introduced more widely.

This five-stage sequence produces optimal results. But impressive benefits also come from implementing even one of the 10 components in any interaction. Restoring people's ability to think for themselves, even for a moment, is worth the effort. And very little research will be necessary to prove the benefit – the results will speak for themselves. **PM**