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Leadership for collective thinking in the work place

T. Martin Ringer

Martin Ringer Consulting, Matapouri, New Zealand



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Leadership for collective thinking in the work place

T. Martin Ringer

Martin Ringer Consulting, Matapouri, New Zealand

Abstract

Purpose - The intention in writing this paper is: to first to raise awareness in organizations of the ubiquitous nature of thinking in teams and informal groups; second to provide the reader with conceptual tools for understanding the subtle dynamics of ‘team-level’ thinking and third to offer some practical suggestions to leaders and consultants on ways of actively working to increase the quality of collective thinking in work places.

Approach – The paper is largely theoretical and extends current theory about the utilization of knowledge and intelligence in teams and organizations.

Findings – The four core elements to effective collective thinking are proposed as: shared clarity of purpose; emotionally and psychologically mature functioning on the part of key players; the necessity for psychologically safe ‘thinking spaces’ and shared responsibility for building, maintaining and utilizing the thinking space. It is further proposed that many essential influences on collective thinking exist outside the usual limits of awareness – that is, they occur as unconscious processes – and so developing powerful collective thinking requires that attention be paid to symbolic, non-rational and intuitive patterns in teams and organizations.

Practical implications – The paper provides theoretical and practical frameworks that enable members of organizations to directly address factors influencing the quality of collective thinking in the systems in which they are involved.

Value – The fresh contribution of this paper is largely that it integrates intuitive, subtle and unconscious dynamics with rational logical principles so as to create powerful new principles to enable leaders and consultants to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Keywords Group thinking, knowledge management, learning organizations

Paper type Viewpoint

“...leadership solves the problem of how to organize collective effort; consequently, it is the key to organizational effectiveness.” (Hogan & Kaiser, 2004, p.2)

Introduction

This article springs from a belief that in many organizations there is considerable room for improvement in the way that we utilize the intelligence of the team or group – that is the potential for ‘collective thinking’. Here, it is understood that the capacity for thinking together in teams is different from, although related to, individual intelligence. Some practical guidance is offered to readers who wish to improve the effectiveness of the thinking that occurs in teams and meetings in their organizations so as to improve organizational effectiveness. The main purpose of thinking together in organizations is to enable coordinated action that contributes towards the organization’s achieving its

purpose. That is, thinking together is a purposeful and pragmatic activity that leads to or enables action rather than just being ‘warm and fuzzy’ or purposeless. There seems however to be a relatively wide spread blindness to the importance of high quality collective thinking for businesses. We value intelligent individuals but seem to lack ways of understanding and working with thinking in the *team-as-a-whole* (Albrecht, 2003; Bohm, 1996; Hogan & Kaiser, 2004; Isaacs, 1999). Furthermore, widespread awareness of the negative phenomenon of groupthink (Janis, 1982) appears to have created a climate of pessimism about the potential for high quality thinking in work place teams.

The size and complexity of most organizations means that the knowledge required to run an effective enterprise is too great to be held in one brain. Hence, effective business leadership and management requires the pooling of knowledge and “thinking skills” from a number of different people. Effective collaborative thinking is needed to distribute the knowledge in an organization and to subsequently work with that knowledge to transform it into effective business understanding and decisions. That is, effective collaborative thinking is the “engine room” for the modern “knowledge organization”, and the “learning organization”.

Four principles are developed that help to provide practical guidance to leaders for building the quality of collective thinking in organizations. They are as follows:

1. Collective thinking in organizations needs to be focused through a shared understanding that the team will work towards an agreed purpose. Facilitating this focus is a key leadership role.
2. Each individual needs to be able to adequately manage his or her own emotional and psychological world so as to retain access to his/her communicational, relational and work skills that enable that person to think together with others in the team. In particular, team leaders need to retain their emotional equilibrium so as to be effective in their leadership role.
3. Relationships as well as groups provide a “thinking space” and so the quality of relationship has a direct impact on the quality of “thinking-together”. Furthermore, the quality of mood, tone and expectation in any group or team has a significant impact on the quality of thinking-together in that team.
4. The responsibility for building and maintaining a thinking space in the team needs to be shared by members of the team and not left to the formal leader or facilitator. Furthermore, The development and maintenance of a high quality environment for collective thinking needs to take into account unspoken and out-of awareness elements that are present in work place teams.

A theoretical overview that stresses the pervasiveness and importance of collective thinking and principles for understanding the dynamics of collective thinking precedes the more practical elements of this paper.

A common experience – when a team does not think together

The topic of collective thinking is a complex one and so there are many different ways in which the potential “intellectual horsepower” of a group or team can be either enhanced or diminished. In modern leadership practice, relatively little attention has been paid to the quality of collective thinking (Rock, 2006); we do not have sharp

instruments to detect and work with the ways in which teams harness their capacity to think together. Lack of practice and lack of “ways of seeing” can make it difficult to detect patterns and dynamics that signal the presence of poor quality collective thinking. I have described below some of the clues that appear to signal the presence of wasted intellectual capacity in a team and have added a few comments on the role of the team leader. Poor quality team-level thinking is present when:

- The atmosphere of a team does not feel safe enough for most participants to think and speak freely, so despite the fact that individual team members may be thinking exceptionally useful thoughts, these ideas are not made available to the rest of the team. Hence, *individual* thinking may be great, but *collective* thinking is impaired because the thoughts of any one team member are not spoken and hence made available as stimulus for further thinking of other team members. However team leaders are likely to feel less fearful or inhibited than team members and so the team leader is probably the least likely to notice this unhelpful pattern.
- Patterns of assumptions, norms and beliefs prevalent in the culture of the organization prevent some topics from being addressed, questioned or introduced into the conversation, but nobody is consciously aware that these patterns exist in the team or organization. Furthermore, nobody is aware that there are “forbidden zones” or “forgotten zones” in the range of possible topics of conversation. This results in a kind of “blindness” that can not be addressed until the taken-for-granted patterns are brought into the awareness of the team (Douglas, 1986; Obholzer, 1994; Stapley, 2006).
- The leader of a team attempts to create open debate in a team but inadvertently signals through his/her actions over time that there is not really space for ideas that are too different to his/hers. Often the team leader is not aware that this is what he/she is doing and so it is very difficult for team members to address the problem. Instead, team members “go through the motions” and let the team leader keep believing that he/she is facilitating a great collaborative conversation (Wong, 2006).
- A team unknowingly becomes locked into a type of thinking that is not the most useful for the situation. For example, convergent thinking is required for decision making. That is, when an adequate number of options have already been identified, the number of ideas needs to be reduced to the one that is finally chosen. On the other hand divergent thinking is required when a team is seeking to be creative in the search for more options. Teams seldom specify what kind of thinking they need to be conducting. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion and low quality collective thinking.
- One or more team members consistently act in ways that creates a team atmosphere in which collective thinking is almost impossible. Persistent patterns of many different types of behavior in a team can lead to loss of quality of the “thinking space”. Examples include, hostility, vanity, big-noting oneself, being constantly ‘hurt’ by what others say, being dogmatic, being opinionated/strident, and questioning *everything*. Whilst team leaders may be aware of the destructiveness of these patterns, they are difficult to change

because directly addressing them can easily trigger yet another outburst on the part of the person or people who are perpetuating them (Clarke, 1995).

- *Team-level* awareness is very low. Individual team members will have one-on-one conversations in the team without being aware that everything they say and do in the context of the team affects the whole team. In the normal functioning of a team all team members witness all interactions between others and use that interaction as information to predict how they themselves will fare when they actively participate. Additionally, team leaders usually underestimate the psychological and emotional power of what they themselves say and do. In general, every move made by a team leader is noticed by team members and these “data” have a powerful influence on “how we do things around here” – i.e. team culture (Ringer, 2002; Schein, 1997).
- Feelings are discounted or over-emphasized. There is now ample research showing that thinking is integrated with feeling (Damasio, 2000, 2003) and that complete denial of feelings diminishes the quality of thinking. In any team a lot of activity occurs at an intuitive level – resulting in feelings, flashes of intuition and half-thought thoughts – but if no team member gives voice to any of this material there is a failure to harness the richness of this collective non-rational effort. On the other hand, being swamped by strong feelings can also drown out thinking. That is, if a team focuses excessively on the feelings associated with a topic, the thinking can be lost (Ratey, 2001). To help build a climate in a team where thinking and feeling are balanced and integrated, the team leader needs to be emotionally competent (Glavas, Jules & van Oosten, 1996). Participants will look to the team leader to signal “what is OK” in terms of balance between thinking and feeling and if the team leader is not aware of the unbalanced nature of a conversation, it can be difficult for team members to break the pattern themselves.
- Curiosity is absent and even replaced by blame and attack. That is, team members show no real interest in the impact that they themselves are having on the interaction and instead blame others for anything that goes wrong. The way in which a team leader discourages blaming behavior and encourages curiosity has a major impact on how the team as a whole moves between being curious or blaming (Isaacs, 1999).
- Conversations are driven by time restraints so that the criterion for the success of conversations is that they have been ‘finished’. This results in forcing closure and curtailing potentially useful input. Furthermore, the anxiety that is generated by being hurried along diminishes the quality of the thinking that does occur. Time is a real constraint in any business setting, but false economies can be created by talking briefly about a multitude of topics rather than thinking in more depth about a few. Leaders who value decisiveness and closure above high quality thinking are likely to exacerbate this unhelpful pattern.

Whilst some of the symptoms listed above can be quite dramatic in their appearance, it is also common for the ineffectiveness of collective thinking in teams to be quite unspectacular in that there is a dull energy-sapping tone to the interaction where participants are disengaged or uninterested rather than visibly struggling or avoidant. Paradoxically, this ‘dynamic of dullness’ is often present in meetings in organizations

that have adopted ‘best practice’ meeting procedures based on tightly structured, logical and sequential protocols. That is, strictly rational meeting procedures can easily strip the energy, life and passion out of team-level conversations.

The appearance of a team that is effectively thinking together

It is possible to obtain cues through observation that indicate when the quality of collective thinking is high. Participants will probably seem to be acting as if something interesting, challenging or engaging is going on. It will appear as though most people present have a positive expectation that it is useful to take part in the discussion. Team members will vary over time in the degree to which they are actively involved, but on average there will be a purposeful sense of industry about the team (Bion, 1961). Conversations will probably occur in intense bursts, sometimes interspersed with silences that may feel full and rich because participants will be immersed in intensive thinking about the topic under discussion. The conversation will not always seem to be logical in that it may weave around the main topic of discussion, but most of these apparent diversions will end up adding something to the overall exploration. There are likely to be a number of disagreements as team members assert their opinions strongly and even passionately. As time progresses, coherent patterns will start to emerge in the conversation, and some of these patterns may even evolve into decisions, commitment to action, or an agreement that there is emerging understanding in the team about something that has previously eluded understanding.

If we could look a little deeper and see what is going on in people’s heads and hearts, we might find out that most people present perceive the team to have a shared understanding of what is being discussed and why. They will have a positive expectation that what they say will be at least held in mind by others present and will be given some consideration, even if their ideas are eventually discarded. They will be reasonably confident that they will not be personally attacked. They will be largely curious about what others say and will be prepared to ‘play’ with ideas; that is, let their minds free up and go in unexpected directions that are not necessarily logically related to the topic under discussion, although they will still hold in mind the intention of the discussion. They will also be curious about what is going on for themselves. For example, at times each person in the group will reflect (usually silently) on what is going on in his or her own internal world. That is, participants will at times quietly reflect on how engaged, how excited, how fearful they are. Often they will take the next step in the chain of curiosity and that is to ask themselves questions like “what is it about me that has me thinking, feeling and doing what I am right now in this group?” (Argyris, 1993; Isaacs, 1999; Schon, 1995) The kind of curiosity that keeps a thinking space in good shape is two directional: Participants are curious about what is going on in the group – that is ‘outwards’ curiosity – and at the same time they will be curious about what is going on in or with themselves and their own functioning – that is “inward” curiosity.

Effective collective thinking will sound, look and feel different depending on the nature of the topic, organizational culture, setting and level of urgency and so it is not possible to describe any one ideal way of thinking together. What is more, a group that is thinking effectively together is likely to experience quite wide swings in the feeling and interactions in the group. Effective thinking in groups and teams becomes evident in *patterns* of interaction that need to be observed over a period of time, rather than

being evident in any one “snapshot” of team interaction (Gordon, 2001). Hence, the overall question that we need to ask when we are assessing the effectiveness of the thinking in a team level discussion is “Over the period of this meeting/interaction, how well is this group of people making use of the intellectual resources and knowledge that exist in this team?”

What collective thinking is not

When I talk to others about collective thinking, I’m often asked if I mean ‘groupthink’ or some form of mindless conformity to the pressures of the group to all think the same thing. My intention is the opposite; that of the meeting of minds where each person retains his/her individuality and at the same time contributes to a lively and diverse group-level conversation. Conformity, concurrence and other related breakdowns in collective thinking occur when team members act as if the most important thing is to achieve something other than active exploration of a diverse range of thoughts. It is likely that the quality of collective thinking will suffer if any of the following goals are pursued as if they are the *primary* purpose of the group:

- Harmony and/or absence of conflict (Anzieu, 1981).
- Unanimity or even sometimes consensus (Janis, 1982).
- Democratic decision making and concurrence (Janis, 1982).
- Togetherness or “one-ness” (Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996).
- Smooth functioning (Bohm, 1996).
- A sense of order or predictability (Stacey, 2003).
- Continual team member satisfaction (Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt, 1999).

In contrast, effective collective thinking may at times involve elements of conflict, tension, diversity, confusion, divergence and insistence on difference between team members (Deslauriers, 2002). Processes involved in effective collective thinking may at times seem rough, clumsy, diverse and unpredictable. At times the emotional and psychological strain on team members may be greater when involved in high quality collective thinking than it is when pursuing some of the goals listed above (Chapman, 1999). So one moral of the story is that feeling good in a group or team does not *necessarily* mean that high quality group-level thinking is occurring (although high quality collective thinking *can* feel great). From the above discussion it is evident that it is not easy to know how to assess or how influence the quality of collective thinking in teams. The principles presented below are intended to form the basis of means by which the reader can formulate his or her own guidelines.

Four core principles underpinning collective thinking.

There are four elements or principles to hold in mind simultaneously whilst working in a collective that seeks to think together effectively. They are:

- (1) *Task*. That the team develops a shared understanding of the team’s purpose or “task” amongst those involved in the meeting at all times. This needs also be understood by participants to support the longer term purpose of the team. It is this shared understanding that provides much of the authority to act and that is an essential part of the mental ‘container’ for the team’s functioning.

- (2) *Managing self – focus and distraction.* That participants are able to adequately manage their own internal emotional and psychological worlds. That is, the widespread need for good “self-management” that enables team members to be present emotionally and psychologically to hold conversations that support the purpose of the meeting and to relate to others and to relate to the group.
- (3) *Relating with others to create thinking spaces.* That adequate quality of the team atmosphere, sub-group functioning and one-to-one relationships in the team provides adequate thinking spaces. On average, team members need to have durable expectations that their relationships with others in the team will remain safe and responsive enough to allow thinking to occur in the context of those relationships. Adequate quality in tone, mood and feeling in the team as a safe, responsive and purposeful enough group also creates a *team-as-a-whole thinking space*. Sub-groups can also form provide useful thinking spaces for their members.
- (4) *Shared responsibility for collective thinking.* That the team-as-a-whole takes active responsibility for building, maintaining and using the thinking space – rather than assuming that a leader or facilitator will take sole responsibility for this. Additionally that the subtleties of the dynamic – including intuitive and out-of-awareness elements – are taken into account.

The each of these four elements is examined in more detail below.

1. Task

It is only when each team member has an adequate understanding of the purpose of the team that members feel empowered to take actions, express opinions, discuss and argue – that is, take part in thinking together. What is more, each team member also needs to feel confident that others have sound understanding of the primary task; i.e. “what we are here to achieve right now”. The authority or mandate that any team member has to contribute to the conversation at any time derives from the shared understanding of the “primary task” [2] of that team. A particular art in team leadership (and membership) is to be able to work with the team to help obtain a shared understanding of the actual primary task of the team. Nonetheless, even when there is overt agreement on the stated primary task, team members may still act as if they are working on other tasks that remain hidden or at least un-stated.

The tendency to act as if the real task is not the overtly agreed task occurs because human behavior is influenced at least as much by unconscious (out-of-awareness) factors as it is by conscious factors (Armstrong, 2006). It is very common even for intelligent, aware people to believe that they are doing one thing whilst actually doing something else (Chapman, 1999; Wilson, 2002).

Tasks that aren't the real agreed task

Some of these diversions or ‘pseudo primary tasks’ that team members act upon at times include:

- Acting as if the task of the team is to keep (senior) people in the organization happy. This creates a strong wish for concurrence with the views of senior people hence prevents team members from pursuing their own opinions. This is

the basis of “groupthink” as described by Janis (1982). Whilst it is true that all teams need to take into account the opinions of people senior to them, some will abandon the primary task and act in ways they think will please their managers. This dynamic usually occurs outside the direct awareness of team members and of the team leaders whom they are trying to please.

- Acting as if the team exists to keep the peace, rather than to do the real work. Teams that avoid voicing difference of opinion seldom do effective work, because they act to preserve the illusion harmony rather than surfacing tensions and disagreement between team members (Anzieu, 1984; Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996).
- Each team member acting as if the team exists just to meet the needs of him/herself as a team member. It is true that team members needs need to be met, but it is important that this happens at the same time as getting the primary task done rather than individual team members meeting their needs regardless the overall goal of the team. Such self-seeking behavior is usually conducted covertly and even unconsciously so that the behavior is not noticed (Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996).
- Team members acting as if their job is to follow procedures. Procedures are intended to prevent people having to invent everything from scratch and to maintain adequate standards of safety and integrity without having a detrimental effect on creativity. However, some teams refuse to question or challenge procedures and rules even when such questioning would clearly result in the team doing a better job.
- Doing the exact task they are told to do and not what they think best. Even when doing what they have been told to do clearly does not achieve the best interests the organization. This is a kind of defense against being criticized because the team can then (falsely) claim that they are just doing what they were told... “it’s not our fault.”

There are many other kinds of “pseudo task” behavior that teams and individuals engage in and there are no fail-safe ways of preventing pseudo task behavior. What team leaders can do though, is constantly ask themselves and the teams they are working with the following question: “By acting this way, what primary task are we *really* achieving, and is that the task that we have agreed to achieve?”

2. Managing Self; Focus and Distraction

Human beings only have a certain amount of attention available at any one time (Ratey, 2001). That is, the total amount of cognitive and emotional material that we can deal with at any one time is limited. Having to deal with emotions or thoughts that are not connected with the purpose of the team can reduce the amount of energy available to work on the primary task. In particular, events that trigger a strong emotional response will result in an attempt to make sense of that event and hence arrive at a less intense emotional state. This effort will often take the focus off interacting with the team to contribute to achieving the agreed primary task.

Even without having to deal with events that involve a great deal of emotional disequilibrium, there are already extensive demands on human attention simply to take part in collective thinking. These ‘routine’ demands include team leaders and indeed, team members:

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- Keeping track of their thinking and reasoning, in particular as regards how it relates to the purpose of the group or the “primary task”.
- Listening to others in the group both for the factual content of what they are saying and for information that relates to the quality of relationships between themselves and others in the group.
- Being emotionally ‘tuned into’ the group to determine both how well the group is functioning as a place for thinking together.
- Being aware of and attentive to their own emotions [3] and intuition to monitor how the quality of the group-space supports or undermines their ability to share in the thinking space and to stay on task.

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Distraction that can divert focus away from thinking together occurs in many forms. A small event such as a comment from another team member that pushes an emotional “button” is enough. Events that make participants look stupid, incompetent or badly informed could all potentially take a lot of attention away from thinking together with other team members. The overall pattern we focus on here is that when participants’ emotions are disturbed or aroused past a certain point, their focus, energy and attention is largely consumed by their efforts to manage themselves enough to stay acting in ways that meet the expectations of others in the team rather than “dumping” their emotions on others, withdrawing or emotionally “exploding”. A personal example of such an event is being provoked to anger by an event in a team, hence requiring us to focus our energy on managing our anger until we can express it without destroying the group or making ourselves look silly. People who are very skilled at managing themselves internally spend less time distracted with tasks of inner management than do people who are not so skilled at inner management. Inner management is a skill that can be learned through coaching and practice. At least occasionally everyone can expect to have to take ‘time out’ from thinking together to manage strong emotions, but hopefully the more skilled participants are at managing their internal worlds, the less time out they remain distracted from the business of collective thinking. It is important to note that skilful self-management *does not mean suppressing emotions*. Rather, it involves paying attention to the feelings and finding ways not to be overwhelmed by them as well as making sense of feelings and using them as information about what is going on.

The “moral of the story” is that team leaders and members alike need to be skilled at managing their internal worlds so as to leave enough focus and attention available to relate to others, to the team and to the primary task of the team. The term ‘emotional and psychological maturity’ used in the introduction to this paper encompasses the ability to adequately manage one’s own emotional world. Emotional intelligence is a key part of this (Goleman, 1995).

3. Relating with others to create thinking spaces

Thinking to oneself can be viewed as a silent conversation with self (Stacey, 2003) but nonetheless still a form of conversation. Conversations occur between two parties and so it can be said that thinking requires a relationship – even if it is apparently a relationship with self (Ringer, 2002). Whilst the theoretical basis for this claim lies beyond this paper, a core principle developed here is that ‘thinking together’ occurs only in the context of some form of relationship and that the quality of that relationship

has a huge impact on the quality of thinking. Relationships are hence seen as ‘thinking spaces’.

There are many forms of relationship in work place teams. Each team member will be aware of some kind of relationship with other individuals and hence there are thinking spaces that occur in the context of one-to-one relationships even if the conversations occur in the presence of other team members. A second form of thinking space is formed by sub-groups which are one of the essential building blocks of teams (Agazarian, 1997). Sub-groups occur within commonalities such as gender, professional background, belief systems and loyalty to others. So within each team we can find subgroups within which both real and imagined conversations occur and which also form thinking spaces. Finally, the overall ‘feel’, or atmosphere of the team results in the team-as-a-whole constituting a thinking space.

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Expectations are at the heart of relationships (Armstrong, 2005). The most powerful predictor of whether a particular relationship will provide a good thinking space at any given time is the kind of expectation that each party has about how safe, secure and responsive that relationship will be. These expectations are likely to change as a result of each new interaction; as each conversation or meeting unfolds participants change their expectations in the face of new data on the nature of the relationships in the team, although some more deeply seated expectations can take a long time to change.

At any moment when anyone is in a position to hold a conversation – i.e. think together – with one or more other people, they will act as if their expectations about their relationship with the other(s) is true. So it is normal for people to keep ‘in mind’, mostly unconsciously, an understanding of how safe and responsive are their relationship with these other people. The safer and more responsive they *expect* the relationship to be, the more likely it is that they will speak openly with the other(s). This is equally true for team leaders as it is for team members. In fact everyone who is involved in thinking together with others in the team will have made – mostly unconscious – assessments about how safe and responsive are the relationships between themselves and others in the team. So expectations or ‘relationships-in-the-mind’ largely influence how open and helpful is the interaction at the start of any meeting. Very quickly, these initial expectations are tested through each person assembling new information from what he or she understands to be happening in the meeting. Open and cooperative behavior on the part of others tends to increase the belief that the relationships are safe and responsive, whereas closed and defensive from one or more team members behaviors tend to lead other team members to reduce their trust that relationships in the team are adequately safe and responsive.

Only the part of participants’ focus that is not already tied up with managing their internal world will be available for them to relate to others in the team. The quality of the network of relationships in the team also influences participants’ willingness to talk, relate and think together. Any person who is in a meeting with others will – usually unconsciously – constantly be assessing which individuals and which subgroups in the room are likely to support their point of view and which ones are likely to attack or discount what they say. New information about the nature of relationships in the room at the present time will be compared with previous expectations. Experiences that contradict expectations can lead to the formation of new ones which will guide behavior from that point onwards. The new information will be gathered from verbal communication, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and a

host of other sources of information that human beings are constantly transmitting and receiving outside their conscious awareness.

However, for a team to think successfully together, it is necessary for each person in the team to talk about their knowledge and ideas so that new thoughts and ideas can emerge into the “mix.” Hence, the quality of the relationship between any team member and each of the other team members has a major influence on how willing they are to share, talk and make their opinions known.

The team-as-a-whole is the most significant ‘thinking space’ that exists. Previous experiences with a particular team and with teams of a similar nature will have a major impact on how participants approach each new meeting or gathering. People act in teams as though they understand how safe or unsafe it is to talk, laugh and voice ideas. Participants might act as if the team is receptive to our ideas and a safe place to talk, or they may act as if the team is hostile and hence an unsafe place to talk. Everyone’s behavior in a team is strongly influenced by their expectations or beliefs about the nature of the team. And given that team members (and leaders’) expectations are shaped by their experience, the way to build expectations in team members of a receptive, responsive, real and safe team is for the team to consistently act in a way that is receptive, responsive, real and safe. The same principles apply as in shaping behavior during one-to-one interactions. It is important to understand that participants build fairly pervasive expectations about the nature of teams and these expectations are a major and persistent influence on their behavior in teams. For instance one might think of a team as being “nice” and even if from time to time one experiences it being nasty at times, one may still retain the belief that it is nice and so keep relating to it as a nice team.

Participants’ mental representations or expectations influence more than just their overt communication in a team, they also influence to what extent it is possible to think, feel and perceive in the presence of the team [4]. So, if the team space is kept feeling relatively safe, secure and responsive, it will enable all participants to support each other’s ability to think, feel and notice what is going on – as well as their ability to implement actions. So noticing their own minute-to-minute perception of the nature, tone or character of the team helps participants to understand better how they can helpfully take part in collective thinking at any given moment in the presence of that team. In more general terms, understanding what kinds of interaction in a team help the quality of the thinking space can give ideas on what kind of leadership actions will grow the thinking space.

4. Shared responsibility for collective thinking

It may seem trivial to repeat that collective thinking is a collective activity, but in my experience, a major impediment to successful thinking in teams is the failure of team members including the leader to understand that the whole team needs to share responsibility for creating and maintaining the thinking space. Second, many teams are either unaware of the need for high quality collective thinking or else ignore that need. Hence, the leader has two main functions:

- 1) to overtly model behaviors that support building, maintaining and good utilization of a high quality thinking space and
- 2) to directly motivate and influence team members to take an active part in creating, maintaining and using this high quality space.

The primary task of a leader who wishes to mobilize the knowledge and thinking capacity of his/her team is to work actively with the team to build and maintain the thinking spaces in the team and to facilitate the effective use of these thinking spaces. Hence, team leaders will need to work actively to create the likelihood that the majority of team members will develop and maintain positive expectations that their input will be valued. That is, the leader will be constantly gauging the expectations of team members about the safety and responsiveness of the team and he/she will see it as his/her role to facilitate interactions in a way that is expected to provide team members with frequent pieces of evidence that the team is a safe, purposeful and positive place to be.

Practical suggestions for leaders

Having said this, there is no magic wand to create effective collective thinking, otherwise it would be already well widely known throughout the business community. However, those who are prepared to work on their skills and knowledge can do some things to improve their ability to lead teams to be more effective with collective thinking. Some ideas follow that may be helpful:

- Base your leadership and facilitation on a coherent and operational conceptual model of effective collective thinking, such as that presented earlier in this paper. That is, learn the science and psychology of team-level thinking so as to give yourself tools for thinking about, talking about and working with this phenomenon.
- Understand that team-level thinking occurs *in addition to* high quality individual thinking. Collective thinking is a different but related phenomenon to individual thinking, and follows different rules and requires some additional understandings.
- Teach yourself to pay attention to the team-as-a-whole and not just to individuals or relationships in the team. There are some excellent models, theories and techniques for working with the team-as-a-whole although some are little known in the business world today (Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964; Senge, 1992).
- Build on your own intuitive functioning and your awareness of subtleties in human interaction and in team-as-a-whole interactions. Both feelings and unconscious processes have a huge impact on collective thinking and so understanding the hidden dynamics of teams is a pre-requisite to working better with team-level thinking. There are a number of competencies required to facilitate effective collective thinking, but the topic of competencies is outside the scope of this paper.
- Improve your familiarity with your own internal world and habitual patterns of perceiving, believing and behaving. Curiously enough, being familiar with one's own responses to the world improves your chances of noticing and making sense of what is going on around you.
- Build an organization-wide culture that is prepared to address the quality of collective thinking (Zubizarreta, 2006). Once it can be spoken about it is possible to deal with many patterns of interaction that reduce the quality of team-level thinking. That is, expect your organization to take team-level thinking seriously. Have the courage to name it and address it in your organization.

Conclusion

Team-level (i.e. collective) thinking is at the heart of organizational success in that it mobilizes the collective knowledge and intelligence of the organization.

Because of the widespread individualistic focus of Western business models, the need for high quality collective thinking in organizations has been relatively neglected, with the result that many businesses unthinkingly maintain relatively poor practices in team-level thinking.

Leadership for collective thinking is not simple. It calls for attunement to intuitive and implicit as well as rational and explicit themes in the team (Rock, 2006). The experience of being in a team where effective collective thinking is occurring may be emotionally and psychologically challenging. It can be tempting to avoid dealing with the difficult emotions that can arise in the intensity of high level collective thinking. In practical terms, leaders and facilitators need to be able to touch regularly and lightly on the question “How well are we thinking together in this interaction?” And this question needs to be felt and asked by all or nearly all of the people involved, not just the leader. Leadership for collective thinking involves taking enough care of the conditions for the team so that the team feels the urge to create its own thinking space – that is, a generative space within which powerful and effective collaboration emerges spontaneously. Other themes that emerged from this paper are that:-

- Effective leadership emerges through an accumulation of many effective leadership interactions rather than “good leadership” existing in some objective sense
- Conducting one or more effective leadership interactions may not necessarily be accompanied by an enjoyable or satisfying experience on the part of the leader. That is, the experience of being effectively led can be very different from the experience of effectively leading
- Effective leadership for collective thinking involves “self as instrument”, where the personal effectiveness of the leader is a foundation requisite for leadership for effective thinking. Leaders and facilitators need to work constantly to improve their ability to lead for effective collective thinking.

Finally, this paper explores a range of aspects of collective thinking, but it is apparent that the knowledge base required for enhancing collective thinking in organizations and teams has only been touched upon. The topic remains, challenging, complex and elusive. Both in this paper and in the business world at large the journey is only just beginning.

Notes

1. The term “collective thinking” is used in preference to “collaborative thinking” because collaboration is a part of harnessing the potential of a collective, but is not enough. For a full treatise on the difference between collective and collaborative functioning please refer to work in progress by the same author.
2. The “primary task” of a team is a combination of the fundamental reason for which it exists and how it goes about achieving its goals.
3. Contrary to earlier views, thinking is an activity that involves simultaneous cognitive and emotional effort. Mathematical reasoning, on the other hand, can be less overtly reliant on emotions.

4. Mental representations of a team also influence what can be felt, thought and noticed even when one is not directly in the presence of a team. Furthermore, it has been said by some that a team only exists when there are shared mental representations of the team that persist in periods when participants are not actually in direct contact with the team.

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Corresponding author

T, Martin Ringer can be contacted at martinringer@groupinstitute.com

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