

CASE STUDY – BWA (BUSINESS WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION) Thinking Environment Forum for the ExCo, 9TH FEBRUARY 2006

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I have worked in partnership with the BWA (Business Women’s Association of South Africa) for several years. My role includes pro bono workshops to develop leadership, management and networking skills for members, as well as being a frequent key note speaker at annual AGMs. In February 2006 the Board asked me to facilitate a ‘thinking forum’ to help them brainstorm ways to increase membership and facilitate networking at their monthly events.

In preparation, I asked the board members to email objectives for the session in advance, and to frame all of their objectives in the form of a question. I asked each individual to frame one agenda item. My email request specified the following:

“What I would like you to bring to the board’s Networking Forum are your objectives for the session. However, I would like you to frame your objective in the form of a question, as the mind thinks best in the presence of a question. Ideally, each individual should bring one question they wish to have answered by the end of the evening. For example, if your objective is to think about how to improve networking at your BWA events, the question could be framed as: ‘How can we improve networking at our events in the most effective way and make it fun at the same time?’ Please email these to me in advance, and bring them with you on the evening. This gives me an opportunity to think about how to structure the evening to get the best possible outcome for all. “During the evening we will be working with the skills to ‘think together’ that will serve you personally and professionally. This process is based on Nancy Kline’s Thinking Environment. A thinking partnership is a powerful developmental tool, and in disciplined, ‘boundaried’ thinking partnerships you will give each other equal time, attention, and the opportunity to think through the issues of your choice. This will enable you to free your thinking of limiting assumptions that may be preventing you from increasing membership and creating opportunities to network at all of your events. According to Nancy Kline, thinking sessions are one dependable way to stay true to one’s values and dreams, to reduce stress, to face issues, to set goals, to take stock of successes and to replenish one’s life and work with time, energy and ease”.

The Forum

As an introduction to the three-hour forum, I briefly explained the ten components with an emphasis on attention, equality and diversity. I introduced the concept of positive philosophical choice, and explained how the 12 board members would work in rounds, and in thinking pairs. My understanding, from the brief I had been given, was that there was one over-riding objective, i.e. how to increase networking at our events. It became very clear in the first ten minutes that there were differing and passionate ideas about what the forum needed to explore! I knew I needed to be as flexible and open as possible, and to help them to answer all of their questions. I quickly decided that I would have to find a flexible, new way to work using thinking environment skills. I detail below the model of the evening as it evolved.

Outline of the Forum

Brief introduction to the process

This was to explain the purpose of: working in rounds and pairs, positive philosophical choice, reframing objectives into questions, and the ten components.

1. Round One

What was a time of your life when you were part of a vibrant, successful network?

2. Round Two

What is a question that at the end of the evening you would like to have answered?

I suggested that each individual give a brief rationale for her question to the other members of the board. What emerged were three different themes; some wanted to discuss networking at events; some wanted to discuss how to increase membership; some wanted to discuss the need for diversity of membership – particularly in terms of culture, race and language.

3. Work in Pairs

The next step was to pair the 12 members up to share their individual question with a partner.

This was to give everyone equal time to thrash out the rationale, thinking and emotion behind their own personal objective for the evening, and to hear and understand another point of view. I explained the concept of listening for five minutes to each other without interruption in a paired think.

Once each one had shared her question with her partner, I asked them to write down both questions on one piece of paper, identifying common ground and difference. Their goal was to then create one question from the two questions in front of them!

Once they had created one question per pair, I explained the concept of 'appreciation' and asked partners in each pair to appreciate each other. Before completing the appreciation, they were asked to write down their joint question on two pieces of paper as they would separate and form a new thinking pair following a discussion.

4. Round 3 – Discussion and difficulties

We moved into a discussion round: each was asked to speak once before anyone spoke twice, to air their thoughts on the experience of working in a thinking pair. They shared their difficulties in listening without interruption, their need to be right, and how the newly framed question that emerged from their work together was, on the whole, the superior question.

There was quite a lot of resistance to the process from the New Chair and the Outgoing Chair; they each had an agenda and needed to voice it loudly and vociferously. I addressed both women's points, and worked first with the New Chair. This conversation became a kind of 'demo' as we began to uncover her limiting assumptions about the evening. What we uncovered was her own personal anxiety to ensure she walked away with answers and ideas in order to face the two-year period she was responsible to oversee. I first asked her if she would trust me for the evening to achieve all of the objectives outlined. When she said she wasn't sure, I asked her 'what she was assuming that stopped her from trusting me?'. We worked through this process until she felt comfortable to proceed. The process was important as she was not the one to invite me to facilitate the forum, and more importantly, it won over the entire board to the potential of the thinking process.

5. Change Partners/Exchange Questions

I asked one person from each pair to move clockwise into a new paired partnership. They each shared their newly formed question from the previous pair. They each had five minutes of uninterrupted thinking to explain the rationale of their question. I asked each thinker, at the end of their five minutes, to write down any points they wished to remember. The process was similar to the previous paired partnership where they wrote down their two questions on a piece of paper, and worked together to form a new question. The shared partnership ended in an appreciation of each other. We were gradually reducing our questions down to core themes. At the end of this second round in pairs, the atmosphere had palpably changed. It was vibrant, positive and dynamic. Before moving into a third partnership I asked everyone to jot down any new insights that had resulted so far.

6. Third shared thinking pair to form another new question

This was the third and final shared think; the person who had moved before moved once more into a new pair. They repeated the process as above in step 5. As I wandered around the room it became clear we had reduced our 12 broad questions to five specific ones.

7. Group Round to Share Final Questions

We worked in a group round and each pair shared their question. We ended up with five questions which I displayed on a flip chart. I explained that we would answer these questions that evening

Before moving into the final paired think to answer the five questions, I asked for any insights gained so far.

What arose was not just the power of listening to each other without interrupting, but also their willingness to be influenced by one another. In other words, the 'ego' began to have less of a 'role' in the group.

8. Final Paired Think

The moveable feast continued as they formed new pairs. I asked them to work in their new pairs to answer the five questions. I explained that if they got stuck, they could ask each other the

question, 'what might you be assuming that could be limiting your thinking here? And 'if you assumed something more liberating, what might your ideas be?' Their brief was to develop one or two strategies for each question; they had to hold the listening environment by listening to each other's ideas on each question for two minutes, then to discuss that question and write down agreed actions or strategies. They worked through all five questions and finished with an appreciation of each other.

The questions they were to answer were:

1. How can we facilitate networking efficiently at our functions, especially to help the 'introverted' networker, so that everybody walks out with a number of new contacts?
2. How do we handle networking in a way that encourages members, who attend regularly and thereby see largely the same people each time, to make the meetings exciting and different and thereby have them encourage others to join or to attend?
3. How can we present the same message about the BWA to everyone we meet?
4. How can we work the room from a networking perspective?
5. How can committee members be in the best position to convert guests to members?

9. Presentations in a round to the group

I hung up five flip charts round the room with a question per flip chart. In their pairs they went round and wrote their suggested 'paired' strategies under the appropriate question. The strategies were presented in a round, one question at a time.

10. Final Two Rounds

The penultimate round was to share their learning from the evening. The final round was an appreciation of the person to their left.

In conclusion, they agreed that they had found a new way to work together, and more importantly they had key strategies to take their vision forward. Before the final appreciations, I asked the Chair how she felt now that we had completed the process, bearing in mind that earlier I had asked her to trust me. Her answer was elegantly put as she explained that she felt that, not only had all the questions been answered using the Thinking Environment process, but she also had a way to uncover and transform her own limiting assumptions.

In Conclusion

Although this was a difficult process, because the group was completely unfamiliar with the thinking environment, it helped me realize how quickly a group can move from a negative paradigm to a positive one – and how flexible the work is using a strategic combination of the ten components, positive philosophical choice, thinking in pairs, and working in rounds. The key was to help them use one or two questions to move from limiting to liberating assumptions. As a result of this forum, I have facilitated two leadership/management development programmes with the thinking environment as a subtle theoretical underpinning. In one small international advertising agency, they have completely transformed their working culture after a three-day module, and are beginning to influence their sister companies in South Africa.