

Partnerships need flock thinking

A definition of flock thinking

Flock thinking occurs when:

'Every individual within a group is influential and can have an effect upon decisions reached, but for various and variable reasons certain individuals are more influential than others and the rest of those present accept this.'

Flock thinking can also be likened to the formation and flight of a flock of birds. Recent research indicates that when birds flock and fly together they do so using a decision – making process that is not exactly democratic, but then again not exactly autocratic either. Each bird has an influence upon the direction of flight of the rest of the flock, but some birds, perhaps because they possess greater motivation and skill, have more influence than do others.

Why flock thinking is important for partnership working

Flock thinking is important for partnership working because it offers an effective way of managing less hierarchical and more flexible ways of working that rely upon influencing and persuading rather than command and control.

An example of flock thinking

A good example of flock thinking can be found within the collaboration that took place to create the computer socket into which we all plug our memory sticks: the ubiquitous USB port that enables easy connectivity between differing IT devices.

One influential company (Intel) decided that a USB initiative was necessary, but they knew that they could not make it happen alone. For the initiative to be successful others would need to join in and have an influence upon developments.

Intel therefore decided to consult with the rest of the IT industry, ensuring that those with a significant interest in a USB initiative were encouraged to air their views and influence its direction of travel.

These consultations were done in a methodical and unhurried way that gave each individual involved the opportunity to reflect upon the wider context of IT development and, importantly, their position and influence within it relative to the others being consulted.

This type of consultation was key to the group's (or flock's) effective formation. Some people, finding themselves at the fringes of the flock, realised that they had much more to gain from being associated with its direction of travel than from following their own flight paths. They therefore became willing to accept having less influence than some others had within the flock.

Other people began to appreciate that they possessed more influence than they had previously assumed, finding themselves nearer to the heart of the flock's purpose than they had expected. They therefore proceeded, usually with the acceptance of the rest of those involved, to place themselves towards the front of the flock where they could more easily point out the direction that they felt it should take.

Hence through a partly intuitive, partly rational process the flock formed and decided upon a final direction of travel that culminated in the creation of the USB port. Each individual within the flock having more or less influence, but always some influence dependent upon the needs of the flock and what was required for it to survive and thrive.

How to encourage flock thinking

Flock thinking can be encouraged in the following ways:

- By providing each individual with a 'perch' upon which they can place their ideas in full view of the rest of the flock.
- By providing each individual with 'flying space' within which they can explain, explore and develop their ideas.
- 'Dovetailing' individual ideas into discussions and/or future actions.

Tools to develop flock thinking

To ensure that the three aspects above are effectively integrated into discussions and decision making it is advisable to use thinking and problem solving tools that provide both clear structure for discussions and space for individuals to explore their ideas and how they could be integrated into decisions.

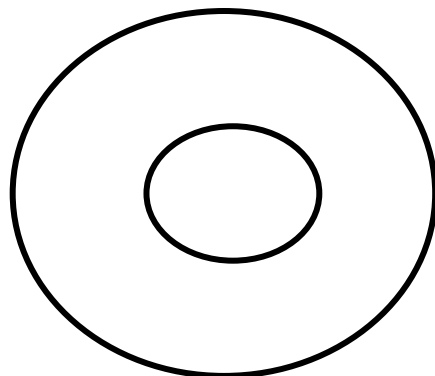
Three tools that provide the above mentioned structure and space are:

- Two – circle thinking
- Edward de Bono 's six thinking hats
- Doughnut thinking

Two – circle thinking

Two-circle thinking ensures that each individual's ideas are acknowledged, explored and given the opportunity to influence actions and decisions (the flock is able to try out different directions of travel before deciding upon the journey it will take).

It consists of drawing or marking out two large circles, one within the other:



The circles need to be big enough to enable a few people at a time to move around, within and between them.

As individuals consider an issue or problem they are asked to write down their ideas for addressing it on large pieces of card or post its (one idea per card/post it). They are then asked to place their ideas face up within the inner circle.

When everyone has contributed as many ideas as they can, each person is asked to review all the contributions. When they identify an idea they feel needs clarification, are not sure of or do not think will work they are asked to place it within the outer circle.

When the above stage of the process is completed there will be ideas within the inner circle upon which everyone can agree. These

can be incorporated within the final decisions reached by the group.

The contributions in the outer circle, however, can still influence the group's actions. These ideas are discussed and considered again, with clarifications sort as necessary.

As a result of this process some ideas will be put back into the central circle and some ideas may be adopted in part, certain of their aspects proving of value. Other ideas may not be adopted, but they will influence the overall scope and direction of the discussions and perhaps raise interesting aspects that might prove important to the group at a later date. In this way all ideas will, to a greater or lesser extent, influence the group's discussions and decision making.

Edward de Bono's six hat thinking¹

Edward de Bono's six thinking hats encourages individuals within a group to hold differing ideas and perceptions in parallel (to fly together but along their own paths). This helps ensure that all contributions are examined, appreciated and woven into the conclusions and decisions of a group. For this reason it is particularly suited to the development of flock thinking.

Each of the six thinking hats represents a specific type of thinking:

- The Blue hat is about being purposeful and structuring and organising thinking and discussions.
- The white hat is about asking questions and collecting facts.
- The green hat is about generating new ideas and different ways of looking at things.
- The Yellow hat is about identifying positive aspects.
- The black hat is about identifying negative aspects.
- The red hat is about expressing feelings and hunches.

A group uses the six hats by systematically applying the thinking associated with each hat to the problem before it.

¹ The six hat approach can enhance thinking and group discussions in more ways than described here. To find out more about the six hat approach and how to use it go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Thinking_Hats

The group applies each hat in turn:

- It may start by thinking about what it wants to achieve and the order in which it wants to use the hats (Blue Hat).
- Then it may ask questions to gain more information about the problem (White Hat).
- Once the group has all the information it needs it may ask itself if there are any other ways of looking at or dealing with the problem (Green Hat).
- It may then look at the pluses followed by the minuses of the differing ideas it has identified (Yellow Hat followed by Black Hat).
- Next, it may explore how it feels about the process it has gone through and the ideas it has explored (Red Hat).
- Finally, it will need to return to Blue Hat thinking and make some decisions based upon the discussions it had whilst working through the fore – mentioned process.

As the group thinks about the problem before it in the ways dictated by the various hats, differing and opposing viewpoints and ideas will emerge. It is important that these are acknowledged and explored in parallel and that the temptation to debate their relative strengths and weaknesses is resisted.

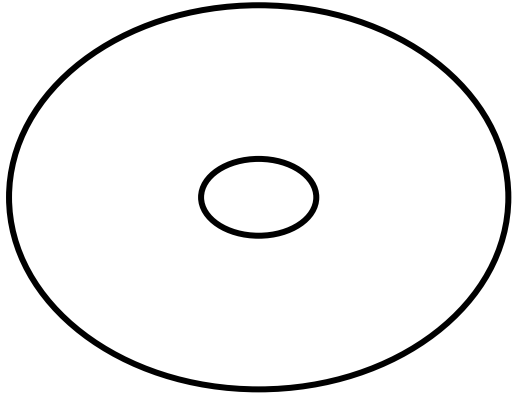
This is because when the group nears the end of the process and revisits Blue Hat thinking it will need to be able to look back along the entire journey of its discussions, so giving all the ideas and opinions it explored the opportunity to influence its final decisions. In this way each person within the group will have had a chance to influence its final direction of travel.

Doughnut thinking²

Doughnut thinking focuses upon allowing each individual to influence the breadth and scope of a group's activities and objectives (how high the flock will soar and how far it will travel).

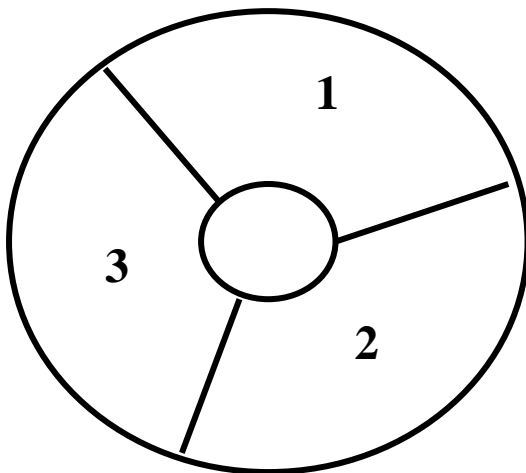
Firstly, the following diagram resembling an American doughnut is drawn:

² To see a detailed description of doughnut thinking and how to use it go to http://www.tallistraining.co.uk/the_partnership_doughnut.htm



Then each person is asked to fill the centre or core of the doughnut with those activities and objectives that they consider central or core to the group's purpose.

Next, the outer ring of the doughnut is split into three equal parts:



These outer segments of the doughnut relate to activities that the group does not consider core to its purpose.

In the 1st segment each person is asked to put those things that they think are easily possible to achieve given the expertise and resources of the group.

In 2nd segment each person is asked to put those things that they think are just possible to achieve. These could be things that with some additional effort and negotiation for additional time and resources could be achieved.

In the 3rd segment each person is asked to put those things that they think are clearly unrealistic, way out and impossible to achieve. These could be things that in an ideal world people would like to achieve, but for one reason or another it is felt that they would not get support or they could not be made to work.

Once the above process has been completed everybody is asked to review the items in each segment of the doughnut and ask:

- Does everybody agree with the items in the core?
- Do any items in the 'easily possible' segment merit inclusion in the core or in some way add value to the work of the group and those items already in the core?
- Do any items in the 'just possible' segment merit further exploration? Could they or any aspects of them add value to the work of the group and those items in the core?
- Do any items in the 'impossible' segment merit further exploration? Could they or any aspects of them add value to the work of the group and those items in the core?

When reviewing the 'impossible' segment it is important to keep an open mind. It is obvious that many of the ideas within this segment will be in themselves unrealistic, but the insights and ideas generated during discussion of them could be of unexpected value to the group's work. For example, it might be impossible to make a particularly troublesome stakeholder 'disappear', but it may be possible to find some creative ways to distract him or her from their problematic activities.

The above tools not only offer the structure and space necessary for ideas to emerge and influence the group, they also provide the opportunity for individuals to 'size up' their colleagues and decide who is best placed to lead the flock and ensure that it survives and thrives. Given the issues and challenges currently faced, who has the ideas, knowledge and skills, resources, confidence and commitment to lead the flock and point out its most effective direction of travel?

Summary

Flock thinking occurs when:

'Every individual within a group is influential and can have an effect upon decisions reached, but for various and variable reasons certain individuals are more influential than others and the rest of those present accept this.'

Flock thinking is important for partnership working because it offers an effective way of managing less hierarchical and more flexible ways of

working that rely upon influencing and persuading rather than command and control.

Intel's collaboration with other IT companies to create the USB port is a good example of flock thinking.

Flock thinking can be encouraged in the following ways:

- By providing each individual with a 'perch' upon which they can place their ideas in full view of the rest of the flock.
- By providing each individual with 'flying space' within which they can explain, explore and develop their ideas.
- 'Dovetailing' individual ideas into discussions and/or future actions.

The above aspects can be effectively integrated into discussions and decision making by using thinking and problem solving tools that provide both clear structure for discussions and space for individuals to explore their ideas.

Three thinking tools that can provide the necessary structure and space are:

- Two – circle thinking (that enables a flock to try out different directions of travel before deciding upon the journey it will take).
- Edward de Bono's six thinking hats (that enables individuals to fly together but along their own paths).
- Doughnut thinking (that enables a flock to decide how high it will soar and how far it will travel).

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References

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