I’ve never really thought about being overly targeted when deciding where the bulk of my management energy ought to be invested. But when I begin to really reflect more deeply on what I’m doing with my time and energy, I can see that I need to bring a lot more focus to bear on four hugely important direct report relationships. But how should I go about restructuring my organisation to allow me to do this? That’s the big question I want to think about today.”

She’s a newly-appointed director working in a large public sector organisation facing some really big financial and structural challenges. She’s very aware that she has a real opportunity to add significant value if she can bring her best game to the role. She also knows that the future trajectory of her career path pretty much rides on making a go of this gig. It’s focusing her mind sharply and she’s asked Ian to spend a day off-site with her, joining her in exploring some of what she believes to be the key issues and challenges she is facing. We call it doing some ‘real-time thinking’.

**QUALITY OF THINKING**

Sian: “We love it when practice partners and key executives set aside the time to think deeply about the big uncomfortable issues lurking around their work. It’s so easy to get seduced into sticking with the humdrum – particularly the urgent humdrum. Looking for solutions to big issues can feel like it carries too much risk.

“Nancy Kline, founder of Time to Think Inc., says: ‘Everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first’. Of course we would all agree with her and at first glance, it can appear to be an incredibly simplistic observation. But it’s not, is it? It’s the word ‘quality’ that gives it its potency.

“What we find on a regular basis across a wide range of businesses, practices and other organisations is that key leaders, senior managers – well, everyone really – can be so busy with the doing of work that there is little time left to devote to the quality thinking that makes that work truly effective.”

Ian’s been asking the client about ‘shift’, wondering what the single most relevant transformational change in her organisation might look like if it were to take place. Her answer is more than a little revealing: “I’d like to see the dysfunctional organisation I inherited become the organisation I would be proud to lead.” Unpacking that one opened up an exciting day’s thinking.

Sian: “Nancy Kline goes on to say that ‘the quality of attention that we give to each other determines the quality of their thinking’. Now that’s a challenging thought if I ever came across one and it’s one that Ian and I are trying to develop in our work, both with our clients and also with each other and our team as we grow our practice together.”

**GOING BRAVELY INTO THE ZOUD**

We live in a fast-paced world, plugged into pretty much endless information at the touch of a screen. It takes a bit more effort to get in touch with our own thinking. Whether we’re working on our own, collaboratively or as part of a team or partnership, however, it’s important that the environment we create around us is one in
which thinking is able to thrive. In working with our clients, we’ve learned a lot about creating that environment.

The Zone of Uncomfortable Debate (ZOU D) is a term we came across in the work of John Blakey and Ian Day; it’s a place we like to encourage our clients to explore. It’s the place where contentious issues can be addressed, debilitating problems can be resolved and difficult decisions can be made. It can also be, as the name implies, a place where pressure builds and thus a place of tension and potential conflict. But it’s where important new thinking occurs as the heart of any issue is exposed and individuals or teams begin to engage with their truth in a very open way.

It’s the place that sits right at the heart of our own real-time thinking conversations together as partners and, as such, it has proven to be a very fertile ground for us to explore as we’ve built our business.

THE COST OF STAYING COMFORTABLE
Ian: “One of the first things encountered when we venture into that uncomfortable zone is an understanding that leveraging what we do well will take us a lot further than trying too hard to tackle what we feel we do badly. It’s uncomfortable for some to face up to the fact that there are just some things that we’re not wonderful at, but if we can move on from that place the results can be quite transformative.”

Sian: “To be fair, it took a while for the penny to really drop with us on this one – perhaps because it initially sounds so counterintuitive. Or maybe because, at first, it could feel as by coming at things from this perspective we might be ducking out of pursuing an important development opportunity. But taking this approach forces us to rely on others around us to work in the spaces where perhaps we don’t create the most value for our organisation and frees us up to add real value by being the best that we can be in the areas where we have real gifting.”

Ian: “In our own work and with many of our clients, we’re also discovering that what is comfortable discussion for one person in a team or organisation might feel like deeply uncomfortable debate for another. As a result, part of a leader’s agenda might be to seek to understand the areas which, while being very comfortable for the majority, might create uncomfortable debate for some of her or his key people and to build some thinking around how to productively manage this space.”

“EVERYONE CAN BE SO BUSY WITH THE DOING OF WORK THAT THERE IS LITTLE TIME LEFT TO DEVOTE TO THE QUALITY THINKING THAT MAKES WORK TRULY EFFECTIVE.”

Sian: “Again, this brings us back to the thinking around social styles that we introduced in our first article and opens up the very important question of how prepared we are to really seek solutions. ‘What, in this context, do we need to ask, might be the cost for us of going into this uncomfortable debate to deal with this issue? And if we commit to going there, we may need to be ready to act on some challenging conclusions.’

Ian: “Of course, the ultimate problem with not taking our thinking and our strategic conversations into this uncomfortable zone is that we can find ourselves in the position of making decisions that lack integrity. Decisions that we don’t really buy into ourselves.

“Sian and I talk about the Four As – avoidance, attack, autocracy and plain old half-hearted acquiescence. These can constitute the endgame for leaders, organisations and teams who make decisions but shy away from taking themselves into the ZOU D. All of these ‘As’ are ultimately debilitating in any organisation, eroding effectiveness from within and leading to loss of morale.”

BACK AT THE THINKING DAY...

She’s reached the three defining questions that she needs to think about. The answers will almost certainly decide whether she will ever manage to develop her dysfunctional inherited organisation into the one that she would be proud to lead. And she’s taking them very seriously.

“Am I confident that I have the backing of my board and other stakeholders to start this journey?” Her answer is an emphatic ‘yes’. “Do I have the passion to do it, and keep at it when the journey becomes difficult?” This time it’s a ‘yes, absolutely’.

“What might stop me going forward in this direction?” She concludes with an equally emphatic ‘I don’t think anything will’.

Sian: “Ian received an email from the client a couple of days later. She stated that she was being given the opportunity and space to think strategically had brought not only some of the previously daunting issues that were causing her to feel stuck when she thought about her role and responsibilities.

“Thinking does that. ‘Thinking and listening,’ says Nancy Kline ‘are not linear; they are creation.’ And brave thinking creates transformational change.”

* Ian Mitchell and Sian Lumsdon are Partners in Eighty20 Focus, an executive development firm that delivers real-time coaching in Ireland and the UK.