



The 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking

What is Advantaged Thinking?

Advantaged Thinking is a philosophy about using the advantages we possess as humans – our assets, talents, resources and abilities – to create the conditions for a society in which everyone can thrive. Rather than getting lost in the safety net for supporting people's disadvantages, Advantaged Thinking looks for the springboard of positive action that will bring about sustainable change. Our traditional focus on the language and outcomes of needs and deficits is given a different perspective through Advantaged Thinking by being better connected to people's goals and assets. Advantaged Thinkers want to create a better future – and they work to build it using the best tools.

Advantaged Thinking believes that everyone has a talent and the ability to be someone positive in life. With the right set of opportunities and support, we can identify and harness everyone's talent for personal and social good. As scouts, we can work to find someone's talent; as coaches, we can nurture that talent; and as agents, we can promote and progress that talent further. Advantaged Thinking looks to invest smartly in people's potential for the present and the future.

The opposite is Disadvantaged Thinking. Disadvantaged Thinkers assume that some people do not have talent. It is a thinking that defines people by problems and deficits, and builds services based on a limited view of the future. DisAdvantaged Thinking helps people survive and cope because it does not think they can do anything more. It works to limit risks and prevent harm, but by doing so does not look for breakthroughs. It is not challenged to innovate sustainable solutions. DisAdvantaged Thinking invests wastefully because it can never find a way to use our full talents to engage the talents of others we don't believe in.

There is a huge social injustice at the heart of the way in which we prepare young people for adulthood in the UK. We seem to value and invest much more in those young people who already had a good start in life, while our inability to provide a positive induction to adulthood for those who do not get that from home often traps them in dependency and deprives us all of their talents. We would do better, for all our young people, if we replaced DisAdvantaged Thinking's labels and stereotypes with the reality of who young people are.

Advantaged Thinking strategises the Foyer Federation's vision for making a positive investment in young people based on developing assets instead of supporting deficits. It encourages us to shape a better world, the right way up, where young people are promoted to be invested in. It's a journey for a different type of youth charity and movement.

Find your place in the Home for Advantaged Thinking.
Your journey starts here.



The 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking

Whether you're taking the first steps in your Advantaged Thinking journey or have been travelling the road for some time, the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking are a positive reflection tool that can refocus you and highlight positives as well as areas to develop.

Although they are called 'tests', it's not the scary notion of a test or an exam. Instead, it's a set of lenses to help you focus in on your practice – a code of conduct to frame your commitment to Advantaged Thinking on.

The aim of Advantaged Thinking is to help us become the positive thinkers and doers that society needs to change lives. Recognising that the world we live in is sometimes surrounded with negative language and beliefs that stop change from happening, Advantaged Thinking helps us to flip things the other way around.

There are 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking. Each test provides a lens to enable us to reflect. This includes spotting the negative, try to overcome its influence, and find a positive way forward. They can also help us identify allies, connect with partners and build on existing relationships. They offer a powerful way of seeing and believing.

Test 1: How we TALK about young people
Test 2: How we UNDERSTAND young people
Test 3: How we WORK with young people
Test 4: How we INVEST in young people
Test 5: How we BELIEVE in young people
Test 6: How we INVOLVE young people
Test 7: How we CHALLENGE ourselves and others
around Advantaged Thinking

This guide provides an overview of each test, along with some exercises to support their application.



Test 1: Talk

Do you always try to use positive language to talk about and describe people, instead of negatives and stereotypes?

Disadvantaged Thinking talks about people in two ways:

1. Disadvantaged, disengaged, disaffected, at risk (Negative tagging – people are identified with negative descriptors or adjectives)
2. Care leaver, young offender, homeless person (Negative stereotyping – people are identified as a negative title or noun)

In both cases, there are no disadvantaged or homeless people. There are only people experiencing disadvantage and homelessness, whose identities are not solely defined by their labels.

Can you identify where you negatively tag and stereotype people in your service? How can you flip the ideas and imagery?

The Advantaged / Disadvantaged Thinking ratio

While we sometimes need to describe people in terms of their experiences and refer to stereotypes, we should never allow the negatives to be at a higher ratio than the positives.

*"Companies with better than a 2.9:1 ratio for positive to negative statements are flourishing."
- Martin Seligman, Flourish, 2011*

We should ensure we talk more about people's abilities and qualities than their problems and challenges, otherwise we are simply adding weight to the things we're working to undo. We need to make sure that positive language and imagery is in higher ratio to the negative.

Identify the positive and negative language used in some of your literature. Calculate the ratio. You can use EdWordle.net to highlight prominent language on your website, for example.

Test 2: Understand

Do you always try to learn about someone's strengths and potential above their weaknesses and limits?

To understand what makes someone tick, an Advantaged Thinker consciously balances knowledge about the negative with the positive.

By beginning questions with the positives, it changes the nature of the conversation. Being positive and aspirational shouldn't be an add-on – it should be foremost.

An Advantaged Thinker wants someone to focus on who they really are – not how they have been described and defined by others. It's a powerful way of saying, 'We want to value and understand you based on what you can do and want to do. Let's begin with that, and then look at some of the barriers and challenges'.

Can you spot any policies and practices in your service where you try to understand people based more on their deficits and problems than their ability and potential? In each case, how could you make the conversation more asset-based?

Services often present information that shows what the 'needs' of people are based on their deficits and problems as well as the tags and stereotypes used by funders and policy makers.

There is no rule, nor funder, nor policy maker, dictating that we cannot also understand people based on their goals, their qualities and abilities. We simply have to put in place the process to understand who young people are in a more rounded, positive way.

Do you have assessments and data sets that show you understand people based on what they can do – both before and after you work with them? What more can you do to understand who people are? What would the perfect data set contain? How can you collect and disseminate it?

Test 3: Work

When you work with others, do you try to focus on developing solutions and assets instead of just supporting problems and deficits?

Working as an Advantaged Thinker with other people means:

1. Looking for qualities in individuals that can be nurtured as assets and strengthened through new experiences.
2. Putting in place plans that will develop these qualities and deal with the problems and deficits that might otherwise get in the way of what can be achieved.

It's a matter of focus. Are you here to help someone achieve, or just to stop them failing too badly? What type of coach and leader do you want to be? The focus not only applies to the people the service is working with, but amongst the staff team too.

Think about the staff and people you are working with and consider the following questions:

- 1. Do people know what they are trying to achieve?**
- 2. What plans are in place to enable achievement and deal with the challenges involved?**
- 3. What are you doing to keep a balance between achievement and challenge?**
- 4. What do you focus on most of all?**

In 2012 Great Britain had its greatest Olympic medal haul since 1908. There are three key ingredients to their success that we can learn from:

1. Access to high quality coaching
2. Access to flexible, personalised investments
3. Access to a community with high aspirations for success.



Test 4: Invest

Do you allocate your resources (money, time, etc.) on enabling people to thrive, instead of just supporting them to cope?

We can invest in people in two ways: to survive and cope with problems, or to build strengths and thrive.

However much both sets of investments might be required, it is the latter which should dictate how much of the former is needed and for how long.

An Advantaged Thinking service allocates its resources – money, time, opportunities – on enabling people to grow in the long term, instead of just supporting them to cope better in the short term.

An intelligent investor in people is always looking for ways to make a difference.

You are an investor. Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. What positive experiences are available in your service for people to be able to thrive?**
- 2. What risks do you take to invest in trying out different possibilities?**
- 3. How much staff time is spent on supporting problems, as opposed to enabling solutions?**
- 4. How are people incentivised to invest their time in taking the risks required to grow?**
- 5. Are you calculating the investment you make in someone and what the impact is on them? Does the cost of the investments you make match their impact?**



Test 5: Believe

Do you always hold out an aspiration for someone's future that is the same you would have for yourself and your family?

A good parent has high aspirations for their children or family members. They believe in a healthy future where their child is happy and fulfilled. They believe their child has talents that require nurturing, and are prepared to make sacrifices to ensure potential is given the time and space to thrive.

Whatever challenges and problems arise, the good parent never loses sight of their child as an individual with a positive future to be lived.

Advantaged Thinking services that work with people must have the aspirations of a good parent.

They have to hold onto the vision for a positive future at all costs, no matter how far a person might be from that vision at any particular moment. They have to grow a positive vision with the person over time and pass on responsibility for the person to believe in and live.

Look at the outcomes that your service achieves and promotes. How far do these match your aspirations as a good parent? Where would you like to do better in?

This does not mean that services are surrogate parents. It is about having high aspirations, with the determination of a good parent to fight for what is possible. Staff must have the right processes to help them keep hold of a positive future at all times.

Identify the processes that enable staff to keep hold of a positive vision. Are there any practices which threaten that vision by focusing too much on the negative?

Test 6: Involve

Do you always involve the person you are working with to use their experiences to develop their own solutions?

Disadvantaged Thinking services are delivered to people as though they are just a customer with a problem to be fixed.

Advantaged Thinking services see people as an opportunity. They believe that the experiences which have challenged young people also offer their own set of insights and qualities that can shape a positive future.

This is why it is essential, and not just a matter of enlightened youth work practice, to involve (as well as support) young people in both creating the solutions to their lives and offering their expertise to assist others.

Identify the processes you have to involve (and recognise) people in:

- 1. Shaping their own solutions**
- 2. Shaping the overall service offer**
- 3. Using their knowledge to help others**

The most successful businesses do not see customers as just someone to deliver a service to. They involve them in the development of the business. The customer experience – good and bad – will always hold the answer to the next innovation. Young people know young people.

How can your service maximise innovation through the insights of people?

How can you involve the people you work with to define and assess some of the Advantaged Thinking tests?

Test 7: Challenge

Do you always listen out for and respond to the Advantaged and Disadvantaged Thinking of others?

Being an Advantaged Thinker requires courage, agility, and leadership.

It means acting on the edge of creating the future, making a path that might not yet be defined, and standing up to change the status quo when others might be happy to hide within it.

It means looking at our own life and at how we represent the vision and values we stand for.

How much courage, agility and leadership do you possess to be a flagship for Advantaged Thinking?

Being an Advantaged Thinker means always being prepared to think differently as an innovator.

It means challenging the Disadvantaged Thinking around us, wherever it limits the potential of people – however unpopular that might make us at times.

It means being pragmatic and fleet of foot to play within the Disadvantaged Thinking discourse of funders and policy makers in ways that will still advance an Advantaged Thinking vision.

[It means wearing the T-shirt.](#)

Identify examples where you have challenged Disadvantaged Thinking, and where you could challenge Disadvantaged Thinking.

How do you challenge your allies, and those who aren't allies yet, to think differently?

Taking Advantaged Thinking action

Advantaged Thinking should be an evolving process rather than a plan written in stone. Together with the 7 tests, the questions below offer a way to keep thinking ahead.

What do you want to achieve as an Advantaged Thinker?

What are the top Advantaged Thinking areas in your services that you should promote?

What are the top Disadvantaged Thinking areas in your service that you could address?

What Disadvantaged Thinking outside do you commit to challenge and influence?

What positive stakeholders could you involve to support Advantaged Thinking?

How can you involve people to develop and promote Advantaged Thinking?

How will you do all this – who is involved – when will things happen?



"We cannot solve our
problems with the
same thinking we used
to create them." -
Albert Einstein

"Be the change you
wish to see." -
Mahatma Gandhi

"We're your future –
not your problem." -
young people living in
Foyers

"There's a way to do it
better – find it." -
Thomas Edison

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