

Fine Point

The Invitation Question – A Brief
History

Thinking Environment

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THE INVITATION QUESTION – A BRIEF HISTORY

The Invitation Question has the longest history in the panoply of Thinking Session questions. Arcane as this history is, people keep asking me for it. Surprised but delighted, I offer a version of it here:

About 15 years ago a number of us began to notice, thanks mostly to Sara, an unsettling thing about the moment when the Thinker thinks their chosen key assumption is true, and the Criteria disagree. The questions we were using to navigate this delicate moment were producing defensiveness and thus threatening the ease of the thinker-centric nature of the session. You will understand why when you see this first version:

'You are assuming that you are unworthy. I appreciate that being so close to the assumption it is easy to think it is true. But if you were to step way back from it, and see it from a huge distance, taking objective information and logic and our view of human nature into account, I wonder whether you then would think it is true?'

Aren't you glad you weren't taking the Thinking Partnership Course during that era?

When I practiced that question with Sara, she said, 'That's a terrible question!'

We (and many others) agreed that it was too long, and that it invited potentially contentious dialogue and often led to impasse.

So we kept trying. I came up with this one:

'You are assuming that you are unworthy. I appreciate that you think the assumption is true. But because the information you presented does not prove that, and because it is not logical that just because your mother told you you are unworthy, you are unworthy; and because our choice of view about human nature is that all humans are inherently worthy, I wonder if you would be willing to consider the possibility that your assumption is not true?'

Mercy. It was nicer, but.

And even the student of one of my colleagues, hearing that new version, said, 'But what happened to the sky and the cows and the meadow?' My colleague looked puzzled. Her student went on, 'You know, all that stepping way back and creating space and perspective and things? I miss the cows.'

And when I tried the new one on Sara, she said, 'This one is even worse.'

Others concurred. So did I eventually.

So after another couple of years Alan and Joan on an InPractice Day (pre-Collegiate era) with Shirley and me had a breakthrough about this question. They proposed that we first state the Thinker's reality and then build a question from that. Brilliant. And a few months of refinement the question became:

'Given that your goal is to feel good about yourself, but given that you are assuming you are unworthy, what could you possibly assume instead in order to feel good about yourself?'

This was a huge improvement. Even Sara thought so.

Then about six months into using this version, a Thinker said in response to it, 'Well, I could assume that I will live forever, that my garden will produce giant cabbages and that my ghastly parents didn't mean it when they disowned me.'

Jeepers. I knew there was no point in asking her to choose one of those three because they were all ridiculously untrue, and because her cynicism was a dead giveaway that she didn't think they were true either.

So I asked this 'invisible-ink' question:

'Are those assumptions credible to you?'

'Of course not,' she said.

'Well,' I said, relieved, 'what would you credibly have to assume instead in order to feel good about yourself?'

'Ah,' she said. 'Credibly. That's different.'

She thought for a while. 'Not sure,' she said.

Then she said, 'I would credibly have to assume that whatever happens to me, I can handle it.'

And the Incisive Question worked; she was off into sound plans and no sign of a giant cabbage.

I think this success came from the probability that once the Thinker chooses a key limiting assumption, they, whether they know it or not, shift into their own search for credibility, for a credible alternative to the untrue assumption that is blocking them.

I think this is because 'credibly' takes the Thinker as close as possible to the 'true, liberating', while keeping them away from fantasy. And in doing so, it importantly does not require them to go further away than they can with integrity from the untrue assumption that still hovers as true.

The search is for credibility. Maryse put it well: 'Credibility leads to possibility.' From the credible alternative assumption comes the possibility of the goal and of the ongoing freedom of independent thinking.

All of this without contention.

In fact at this juncture, the Thinker tends not to freeze, but to do one of two things. Either they either ask the Partner why the criteria disagree that the assumption is true. (This can be a wonderful dialogue if both people maintain a Thinking Environment throughout.)

Or the Thinker moves on happily in search of their credible alternative.

So for a couple more years the question stood as:

'Given that your goal is to x, but given that you are assuming y, what would you credibly have to assume instead in order to x?'

Most people were fine with this version of the question. But some were not, including me. And I couldn't figure out why. Something small but big was not quite right.

Then on a course a year later a student said, 'Well, I guess I would credibly have to assume that I am an ok person, but I don't really buy it.'

'Well,' I said, a swashbuckler at navigating these wobbly junctures by now, 'what could you credibly assume instead in order to feel good about yourself?'

And that took some serious thought. 'Could' is different from 'have to'. 'Could' requires the Thinker to find what assumption truly is credible to them. 'Have to' doesn't. 'Have to' takes them back to shoulds and obedience both of which kill independent thinking.

So the question in full was:

'Given that your goal is x, but given that you are assuming y, what could you credibly assume instead in order to x?'

The Thinker finally found the credible liberating assumption, and it took them, into the Incisive Question, right to their goal.

Lovely.

But not completely lovely.

The question was still long and had too many subjunctive clauses and commas. That syntax made it a challenge for the Thinker to compute it. We usually had to ask it more than once for the Thinker to take it all in.

So on another course two of the students proposed we separate out the three discreet points of the question and change it into two statements and 1 question.

This disturbed my picky sense of what a question is. It is not two sentences and a question, thank you very much. And I resisted. But eventually I saw the light.

So it became:

Your goal is to x. But you are assuming that y. What could you credibly assume instead in order to x?

That was super.

Except for the 'but'.

People proposed that we should never use the word 'but'. Never? Seriously? Who was being picky now?

But over time I could see that just that one word had a 'corrective', 'I know better than you do' flavour to it. So the question finally was:

Your goal is to x. You are assuming that y. What could you credibly assume instead in order to x?

So far this is working well. No difficulties. Beautiful outcomes.

But watch this space. I don't trust that moment of disagreement between the Criteria and the Thinker for a

second. It is delicate. And it is not always obvious where the delicacy is lurking.

As we have seen. :-)