



Making the Invisible Visible



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Making the Invisible Visible

Guest Editor: Alison Donaldson



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Revealing practices

Christina Breene



Both senses of the title emerge in this article. My work as a coach, supervisor and trainer often focuses on supporting others to discover what they do not know they know and to learn what they want to know and sometimes what they might prefer to remain ignorant of. I describe and explain some of the methods used – practices that help people reveal more to themselves and others, to feel more peaceful, as well as be more effective.

Keywords

Consulting, supervising, coaching, questions, emotions, self-assessment, denial, resistance

A question raised by another author in this publication (Shohet 2012), "What would I like others least to know about me and/or my work?" was the main inspiration for the thoughts that follow. For me the question is intriguing, and the fact that "others are likely to know this about us anyway" allowed my thoughts to wander along many routes, including denial, wilful blindness and resistance, then to the valuable practices or tools I use to help make the invisible visible. Some of these practices look simple but, as in the work I also do with Time To Think (an organisation founded by Nancy Kline) simple does not necessarily mean easy.

1. Appreciation (what others may rarely think to tell us)

Last year watching the BBC1 breakfast programme, I was struck when a proponent of making positive, appreciative comments at work was met by cringing responses, the all-too-frequent misunderstanding here in the UK that appreciation is merely flattery, ingratiating behaviour, unpleasant and unnecessary. It is fascinating too, whilst teaching the Time To Think course "Transforming Meetings", how uncomfortable people can be – at first – when required to give and receive appreciation. Yet when the focus is on observed qualities and skills, offered succinctly and genuinely at the end of each meeting, they look forward to appreciation, disappointed if limited by time constraints to literally one word. I found the regular appreciation round at the end of meetings created a space for me to hear what people assumed I must already know but actually had no idea about – and I am not alone. Appreciation can identify skills/gifts that the person knows they have but is unaware are valued by others.

Society teaches us that to be critical is to be informed, grounded, sophisticated, yet "critical" can take a negative distortion. In meetings, often the first, at times the only, focus can be the failures, crises, mistakes and problems. Good things can slip by unnoticed. But reality consists of both good and bad. The mind requires both, a comprehensive awareness of reality, for thinking of the highest quality. At Time To Think we suggest opening with the positive truths about a situation, individual or group, to create balance and the space for people to think at their best.

2. "Amy's question" (what we may not want to see)

A friend of Nancy Kline, Amy, recognised that we can usually last for about a year before we are forced to see what has been right in front of us from the beginning (Kline 1999, p.83). She asked once "What do you know now that you are going to find out in a year?" and now this question has become a Time To Think tool called "Amy's question". If we can ask the question early enough and then listen to the answers, we can prevent failures and heartaches that might otherwise cause unnecessary difficulties and challenges later. The question helps us to tap into what we might be "avoiding" (not facing up to), or start to notice when patterns are being repeated without previous awareness, even though to outsiders this might have seemed obvious all along. It prevents denial – makes the invisible visible.

I have heard immediate, extraordinary insights in response to Amy's question, as well as seen people be startled when they hear it, or others failing to grasp what it means at first. Yet by sitting with the startle or uncertainty and the silence, repeating the question gently and calmly, people come up with some surprising and enlightening answers – surprising and enlightening for both parties.



Brighton West Pier revealed by an exceptionally low tide (photo by C.Breene)

Given the focus of this publication on invisibility, it occurred to me that I might be unintentionally leaving out something obvious from this article. Concerned, I asked my colleague Louise Mycroft to check, using the Amy question. Being highly skilled, Louise asked what time frame I wanted to use and we agreed the question was "What do you know now that you will find out when you read the journal?". Despite knowing the question, hearing it seemed radical at first, yet it generated some unsuspected thoughts, mainly about the brilliant editing process – Alison Donaldson's comments, questions and the resulting discussions had already inspired additions and changes. Some key learning was that I may indeed think of something later that could be included, but there is a space limit and this is long enough. Obvious? Not to me until then – and my disquiet transformed into ease.

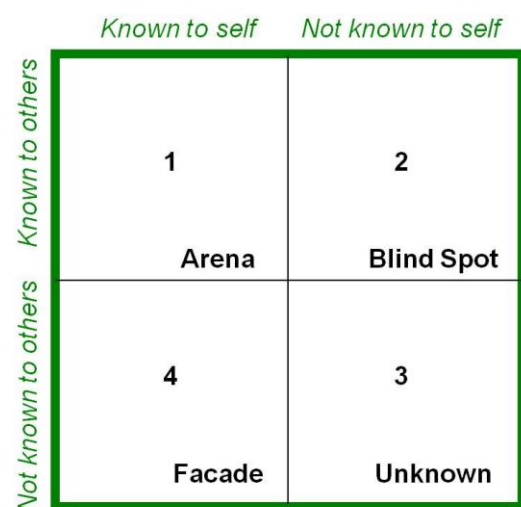
I have found Amy's question useful in both professional and personal life, sometimes wondering what might have been different had I been asked it in my distant past, when making some major life changes, or at the beginning of relationships. Would I have made different decisions, taken an alternative route? Yes, probably. Since becoming aware of it, the question has become a valuable resource – my colleagues and I ask each other regularly, to guide us through muddled emotions or address what we might prefer not to notice, however easily discernible to others.

3. The Johari Window (what others may or may not know before we do)

The Johari window is a technique created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingram (1961). Charles Handy developed the concept by describing four rooms (Handy 2000). Room 1 is the part of ourselves that we and others see. Room 2 is the aspects that others see but we are not aware of. Room 3 is the most mysterious room in that the unconscious or subconscious part of us is seen by neither ourselves nor others. Room 4 is our private space, which we know but keep from others (though Robin Shoet shows in this same publication that we may think we keep more from others than we actually do). One key is to change the balance and size of the rooms. For example, by engaging in more disclosure, revealing more to others, we can reduce Room 4.

Room 2 in the Johari window "Unknown to self / Known to others" of course covers many issues. How do we know to ask about what we do not know? How do we make what is visible to others visible also to us? Besides legal and other requirements, people are not necessarily being unkind in their withholding. Things may seem so blatant to them that they think there is no reason to speak up. Or, they may stay silent, realising that by saying what they notice they may be requiring the person hearing it to face something potentially hurtful. Requesting feedback is not always pleasurable, mainly if those giving it forget what it is like to be on the receiving end.

Johari Window



Feedback matters

Learning to offer feedback well is an important art in helping others to hear it (at first I meant to write "part" but realise that my error is correct; it is indeed an art). Simple questions can support your expertise in giving feedback:

1. *What worked?*
2. *Where did you get stuck?*
3. *What would you do differently next time?*

Listening to the answers will give you all the information you need to respond to others thoughtfully, sensitively. And by allowing the person receiving your wisdom to answer them first, you empty their cup, so that your full jug of invaluable thoughts has somewhere it can be poured safely, without spilling or getting lost – assisted by the often unasked preceding question "Would you like my feedback?"

4. The Strength Development Inventory (when one of our strengths may have become a weakness)

“Feedback” is actually the response of a person to something/someone else. But who decides which response is the best, the one to listen to? One client of mine, Ron (name changed), dismissed the views of others as ridiculous, ignoring complaints to the point that his own position in the organisation had come into question. The Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI), which describes our weaknesses as “our strengths merely being overused”, enabled Ron to hear them.

The SDI identifies and plots the place an individual usually operates from, indicating whether and how this changes under stress. A questionnaire and self-assessment allows people to identify their own strengths and then rank them, gently uncovering what happens if they are overused. Of the many hundreds of possible positions, none is considered better or worse than any other. There is no right or wrong, just the position we are in right now – and this is a helpful approach when dismantling denial or uncovering problems. Ron rated confidence highest, unaware that others perceived his level of confidence as arrogance. Newly sensitive to the fact that his attitude was causing great difficulties, he could tone down his behaviour but remain loyal to his values. The SDI explains differences, highlights where conflicts can occur, then offers useful ways of handling potential disagreements. Also, by physically standing a team in their various respective positions, they gain further insights and understanding of how they operate together, to reveal ways of improving overall performance.

5. Noticing our emotions (when we recognise a strength and source of our feelings)

Unsurprisingly in the above situation, emotions were raised all round. A client recently described to me, with sagacious self-awareness, that when somebody disagrees with her or proposes an alternative opinion, she can get extremely angry. She thinks this is mainly because she is being sidetracked away from a topic or issue of interest to her and being required to listen to what at that point she considers “nonsense”. For her it takes time: time to adjust; time to begin considering alternatives.

She now likes to check what exactly she is resisting and ask herself, “Can I be an observer and watch wherever this is going, without judging others or myself?”

Do you judge yourself or others regarding emotions? What are your views about feelings in the workplace? In our society often we do all we can to suppress them, yet fear constricts thinking and upset can prevent our mind fully operating. Contrary to some beliefs, if we allow others to express emotions just enough, then good thinking can return.



Pebbles uncovered by the tide (photo by C Breene)

6. The Gestalt chair exercise (when we gain a new perspective)

When confused or unable to make a decision, unable to see the path ahead or know what to do, another brilliant tool is “the chair exercise” used by Gestalt practitioners. By assigning a different chair to four aspects of ourselves – mind, body, spirit and emotions – and one to an overall observer self, then asking what each has to say, we can discover extraordinary insights. Only recently I could tell that there was something I knew but did not know. For me this is heralded by a sense of unease, with my mind obsessing, accompanied by feeling uncomfortable knots or churning in my stomach, plus an aching in my heart area – and I am not ill! Our minds and bodies can be of valuable assistance, if we learn to listen to their messages.

It is very important to return to the observer chair each time before moving to another aspect. When I recently did the chair exercise with a colleague, we were in a café, and it may have appeared a strange, comical sight as I moved from chair to chair, to hear what each aspect had to tell me. The most surprising and unexpected was how my mind was very angry with me; it was extremely nasty, using particularly cruel and unkind words and criticisms. No surprise then that I was refusing to listen to all this and thus denying some valuable advice. I am still benefiting from my observer self telling my mind to stop and to include positive comments if it wants its wisdom to be heard.

7. Removing assumptions (when denial is getting in our way)

Aside from being a psychological defence mechanism, denial has a few definitions. One is simply that it is the assumption that “what is true is not true”, or that “what is not true is true”. Obvious perhaps, yet powerful because once we have recognised an unhelpful assumption at work, it can be removed and replaced with an alternative, more useful one. It is important to challenge assumptions, especially in groups, organisations and families. Outsiders often notice denial more easily, hence the value of consultants to organisations. But listening to new employees, not dismissing them as “failing to understand yet”, could also be an effective practice. What might they see that we now ignore? Milgram, in his experiments in the 1970s, concluded that, when we are a part of a group or an organisation, we change our focus as a way to deal with making what appears to be true, not true (Milgram 1974). This is supported by Heffernan’s (2011) fascinating exploration of wilful blindness and the “ostrich complex”, where our horizons narrow when we are in trouble. In Time To Think meetings, we ask questions to prevent both, to highlight what assumptions might be operating that we are unaware of, and to check if we are making the best decisions.

Examples might be:

- “What might we be assuming that is preventing us from finding the finest solution here?”
- “What might we be assuming that prevents us seeing all the issues?”
- “What is right in front of me that I am not facing?”

8. Valuing the one who questions (when one person sees what others miss)

It is not just new employees who can see what others do not. Sometimes what is invisible to most is visible to only a few others, or even to just one person. Do you have someone at work, in your team, or perhaps your family, who seems constantly to question what everyone else happily accepts, whose views differ from the others? Do you know anyone who apparently creates difficulties, seems unnecessarily to slow down

processes, annoying those who simply want to get on and make decisions? Well, you may have someone who sees what is invisible to others! It could be that you have an asset available to you and/or your organisation, one that you are failing to make the most of.

Looking at it from their point of view, being alone with a different opinion in an otherwise cohesive team can be a lonely, uncomfortable place. After I had left his coaching company, the lovely, late Ben Cannon likened my often rather different perspective, one that he had previously thought irritating and disruptive, to the cox in a rowing boat. All the others facing the same direction might agree, he said, but the wise team will listen to the cox – the only one in a position to spot dangers ahead. Elsewhere, I have suggested that resistance to the norm is a natural path. It can indicate that people are thinking for themselves (Breene 2011, p.162).

So maybe that "difficult" person is the cox, whose idiosyncratic viewpoint needs acknowledgement? And if you are the cox, struggling because nobody else sees the waterfall ahead, then insist on being heard – do not jump ship as I did then. Learn to have confidence in what you can see, then help others to know it too.

9. Wait and try saying it again later (if people aren't ready to notice a new idea)

I can remember how, years ago, during meetings, I would occasionally offer a (to me) obvious solution to an issue, and how often it could be ignored. I found it curious that, if another person suggested exactly the same idea later, it was then accepted happily and credited to them, with no memory of what I had said before... even more curious when all this happened within the same meeting. I had assumed I was not being clear, had not spoken loudly enough or was insufficiently assertive. I even wondered if others believed my view didn't matter.

Fortunately, when clients came to me with the same concern, I started wondering what else might be happening. Perhaps sometimes an idea can be too radical to be heard the first time. Occasionally things need repeating to allow space for a shift to occur so that others might hear. So I proposed to my clients that if they came up with a perfectly good idea in future, one that was completely ignored, to say it again later in the meeting and see what happened.

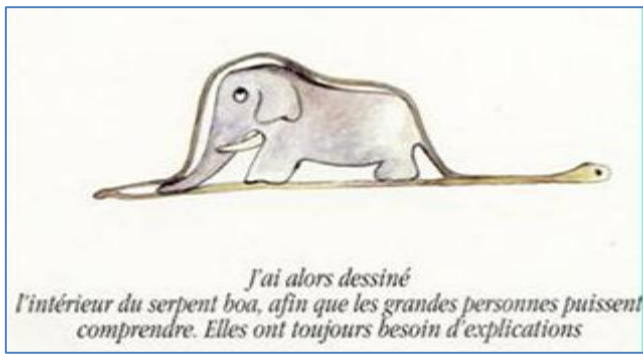
They found that by repeating a good proposal for a second or third time, it was usually eventually accepted. And often (to them, more importantly) they were credited with the insights or genius of their thinking, rather than somebody else.

Are you open to new ideas? What does it take for you to shift your thinking, for a different view to become clear?

Concluding reflection

If I have given the impression that helping people to see what is currently invisible to them is straightforward, effortless, uncomplicated and painless, that was not my intention, since the overall theme of this article is that it's simple, but not always easy. Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *Le Petit Prince* drew a picture of an elephant eaten by a snake, ...





From Sainte-Exupery (1943)

... but most people saw only a drawing of a hat: what was obvious to him got missed. *How you look matters too.*

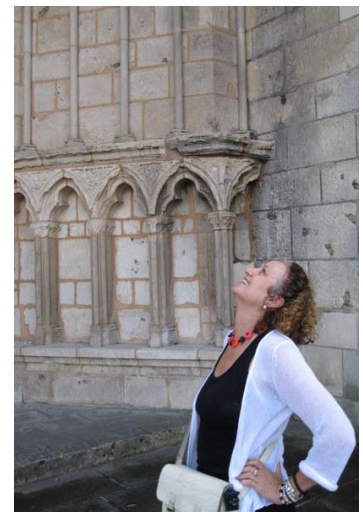
He says, "Here is my secret. It is very simple: one sees well only with the heart. The essential is invisible to the eyes." I believe that with the heart it is also easier.

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Author looking up (photo by Alison Donaldson)

Invitations and Notices

Some forthcoming events

Here are a few of the AMED events that will be taking place in the next three months. You are most welcome to join us.

Date	Event	URL
9 March	AMED Seminar 'New Thinking for Troubled Times' (2).	http://www.amed.org.uk/events/new-thinking-for-troubled-times-seminar-2
23 March	Joint AMED/IAF Facilitation Workshop ' Building bridges through effective facilitation'	http://www.amed.org.uk/events/building-bridges-through-facil
20 April	Joint AMED Writers' Group/Lapidus Workshop, 'Creative writing for wellbeing in an organisational setting' (title tbc), with Gill Gustar	http://www.amed.org.uk/events/creative-writing-for-wellbeing-in-an-organisational-setting-tbc-w
17 May	AMED AGM	www.amed.org.uk/events/amed-agm-followed-by-seminar-3
17 May	AMED Seminar (3): 'New Thinking for Troubled Times'	http://www.amed.org.uk/events/new-thinking-for-troubled-times-seminar-3
18 May	'Editing at Work', our 6 th Annual Collaborative Writing Workshop in Brighton	http://www.amed.org.uk/events/6th-annual-collaborative-writi

The Summer 2012 issue of e-O&P

“How can we create wiser organisations?”

Guest Editor: Julie Allan

Your invitation

Increasingly, we are urged, forced, or are choosing to seek wiser ways of organising ourselves, prompted by reasons of economics and sustainability -- of people, commerce, countries or the planet. What contribution can OD practitioners and others make in creating wiser organisations? In this special edition of e-O&P, we'll share how we're working to raise the 'wisdom quotient' (WQ) of ourselves and our client organisations, and illustrate the ensuing benefits.

Some aspects our authors have been invited to consider

Perhaps you've worked with different value sets or in conditions where much is unknown and perhaps unknowable.

Maybe you've a spiritual tradition or philosophical stance that's informed your work in organisations and you'd like to reflect on its connection with wise outcomes.

Have you worked specifically on adult life stage development in working contexts, and has that been useful?

Have you learned something unexpected from your work which struck you as profound and which enabled a significant shift?

Or have you some reflections on foolishness in organisations that you think provide valuable learning? (Such counterpoints might be another helpful way to examine wisdom.)

Please join our collective exploration by reading, writing and talking about the aspects of Wisdom which you'll find in this special edition. You'll be interested in new conceptual and practical approaches and inspirations through which practitioners might help organisations develop, incrementally or radically, in today's contexts.

About our Guest Editor, Julie Allan

For Julie, her applied research into Wisdom in corporate contexts has naturally emerged as an exploration consistent with professional and personal interests that include psychology, leader development, complexity, story and narrative, ethics and responsibility and raising a family. It seems to her a timely topic for all those of us working alongside leaders at all levels, in business, in non-commercial organisations and more broadly in our communities. Julie also serves in ethics roles for the British Psychological Society.

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Your invitation to become more involved with e-O&P

About e-O&P:

e-O&P is AMED's quarterly online journal, available in pdf format, for academics, professionals, managers and consultants at all stages of their careers. It addresses innovative approaches to personal, professional and organisational development in a reflective and accessible way. It has a practical bias with a balance of well-written thought pieces, case studies, interviews, articles, reviews and editorials. Our articles are succinct, engaging, authentic and easy to read. We maintain our high standards of writing through the careful selection of relevant themes and our support of outstanding guest editors.

About our guest editors:

Once selected, our editors have a pretty free hand within a broad set of guidelines. Guest editors deliver to the e-O&P editorial board a set of articles of suitable quality, ready for publication, according to a pre-arranged schedule. This involves editors in inviting proposals for contributions, identifying authors, commissioning stimulating articles, reviewing, and where appropriate, critiquing drafts and proof-reading final copy.

About our 'Critical Friends':

For their particular edition, guest editors often find it useful to create a small, temporary editorial team to support them, including 'Critical Friends'. The e-O&P editorial board is happy to help them find such collaborators, and is on hand to explore any issues or concerns that arise, bearing in mind our limited time to engage in extensive, detailed reading or conversations.

We are always looking to expand e-O&P's network of 'Critical Friends', who would be available to guest editors or individual authors on request. Depending on their preferences and any specific need, Critical Friends can help by reading drafts, offering constructive feedback, clarifying ideas, commenting on style, providing encouragement, or by proof-reading or copy-editing pre-publication texts. In return, this offers Critical Friends the opportunity to develop greater insight into, and awareness of possibilities for, their own writing and professional practice. They might even consider subsequently becoming a guest editor or author for e-O&P.

Are you interested in joining our exciting project?

If so, please contact one of us on the e-O&P editorial board as soon as possible. We'd love to hear from you.

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A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

At AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations, to generate synergy and critical mass for change.

To find out more about us, you are welcome to visit our website www.amed.org.uk, or contact Linda Williams, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247