

## FINE POINT

In Service of the Question

Thinking Environment

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### IN SERVICE OF THE QUESTION

Sometimes the Thinking Partner has to ask a question that is not 'on the Map'. Discerning accurately when this diversion is in fact necessary is a core skill of the Thinking Partner or Coach. To get it wrong is potentially to destroy the independent nature of the session.

I remember when, on a Coaching Course, Alison Wynne, holding up the Map, said to me, 'I have learned all of these "black ink" questions, but I don't know what the "invisible ink" ones are!'

She was referring, of course, to the questions that are not in the Session sequence, but that we sometimes have to ask in order to go forward with the Session. And I have been thinking ever since about how to characterise them.

I think that those 'invisible ink' questions are the ones we have to ask in order to know which of the 'black ink' questions to ask next. The 'invisible ink' ones are in service of the 'black ink' ones. For example, if as the Partner we don't understand what the Thinker means by a given word or phrase, or if there is not

enough information in what the Thinker has said to allow us to determine, let's say, what kind of further goal it is, or whether or not their key assumption is true, or whether they can put the phrase in fewer words so that we can memorise it, we will have to ask a question to find out. And that question is, therefore, in service of the next question in the Sequence.

This concept is very different from asking a guiding/input/insight/coaching question that as the Partner we feel is 'in service of the Thinker.' As well-meaning as that may be, and as good as that sounds (it is the heart of ordinary coaching after all), it actually is the compromising of the Components of equality, ease, appreciation, diversity and encouragement. Otherwise, it is fine. :-)

Another reason the insertion of that kind of question is disabling of the Thinker is that it was not agreed ahead of time, and it was not invited by the Thinker, and so it is registered as intrusion, insertion and interruption. Even if it is 'clever', it is an assault on the environment that specifically supports the next independent thought of the Thinker. It contravenes the essential focus on how far the Thinker can go before they need our thinking (and only they can determine that). In effect, when a Partner asks that kind of question uninvited, they have brought fully independent thinking to a halt.

The very same question, however, can be generative of independent thinking if it is invited. The Thinker's staying in charge of the session is a crucial aspect of the generative nature of its structure.

So I think that as teachers of Thinking Partners, and especially of Time To Think coaches, we will do well to make clear the distinction between questions that are in service of the Thinker (as nice as that sounds) and questions that are in service of the next Session question.

Autonomy depends on it. And I think we are required as Thinking Partners and Coaches not to delay autonomy.