

## The Power of Incisive Questions

The human mind has many incredible qualities. One of the most intriguing is its capacity to forget the reality of pain – no doubt in its attempt to keep the human race on this planet, despite our best efforts to the contrary.

This ability to banish the reality of pain reminds me of my mind's ability to forget the power of Limiting Assumptions and, perhaps far more wondrous, the power of the Incisive Question. Every now and again, I am reminded in an instant.

February this year was the last of such occasions. A new team was forming in a large, far from new, organisation. People of very different experience and backgrounds were being brought together under the leadership of my client and my role was to facilitate their first meeting in a Thinking Environment. I knew, of course, that every player in the room would be accompanied to that first meeting by all their assumptions, some of them true, some of them very false and very limiting but I knew that they would all be there wanting a seat at the table. So I knew the place would be a little crowded.

The meeting progressed as previously agreed with the client, following the prearranged agenda and, as every new group seems to experience, they stumbled with eye contact with the speaker and a few fell at the hurdle of no interruption. But we were making progress. However, it seemed to me that there were so many assumptions in the room all fighting for air space, that we needed to give them a voice before they sucked all the oxygen out of the room.

So, with my client's agreement, I stopped proceedings and ran a session purely on Assumptions, Facts and Possible Facts, their differences and their relevance to meetings and teams in particular.

I took the group through a shortened version of a Thinking Partnership and then in pairs, they each identified a goal and the assumptions that might be limiting them in reaching that goal. I moved my way around the pairs. Sam was a young graduate, the youngest member and newest recruit to the team. In fact, this meeting was her first day. She was working with Martin, a colleague who was doing his best not to interrupt her and to give her advice which every sinew in his body was bursting to do. After all, he'd been in the team for some time, it was 20 years since he graduated; he was, what most would have called in that company, an old timer.

Sam's goal, in her words was "to identify some clear objectives and to do at least a reasonable job in meeting them".

When I reached this pair, both declared that they were stuck. Martin had asked Sam what might she be assuming that was stopping her from reaching her goal. Sam had replied, in an instant, "I am not capable of doing this job."

Sam said she was stuck because she couldn't think of anything else. I asked her if that was really the only assumption she was holding that might be stopping her and after some thought she said it was.

I then reminded them of the next step in the shortened version of a Thinking Partnership that I was offering, of turning this Limiting Assumption into an Incisive Question.

Sam said that a more liberating alternative for her would simply be that she was capable.

And so I asked her "If you knew that you are capable of doing this job, what might you do differently to identify some clear objectives and do at least a reasonable job in meeting them?"

Her young face ignited like a match to kerosene. "Well if *I knew that* ..." she said and Sam, in amazing detail, reeled off a dozen steps she would take, articulating every one with clarity and excitement.

After a couple of minutes, she stopped and turned to me. "Is that it?" she asked with a frown. "Is it that simple?" "That's it" I said, "It's that simple".

"So", I asked her, "What are you actually going to do?"

"All of that" she said, moving her hand to her thigh with a slap of conviction. "All of that."

I could tell that something fundamental had shifted for her. Here she was, day one as a fresh graduate, realising that she truly was capable of doing the job for which she had been recruited – something everyone else seemed to know but Sam.

Later that day, I was able to talk to Peter. Sam had shared her Limiting Assumptions and her Incisive Question and her committed actions with the group, so I knew it was fine to talk to Peter.

"Wasn't that incredible with Sam" he began. "Indeed it was" I replied. "What for you was most incredible?"