

Reading The Invisible

Session delivered at the
2003 IAF Conference
in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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Reading The Invisible

We can waste precious group time by not knowing what signals to look for in the group dynamics and in ourselves, and how to interpret them. As effective facilitators, we must develop our ability to recognize and discern non-verbal and language cues, body and group energy signals, and group spirit indicators. Our intuition helps us assemble this data and find meaning. From this understanding we know what to act on and how.

There are many ways to develop our awareness and intuition – the predicates for effective action. We will focus on three key areas:

1) Observing ourselves in action: We need to discover ways to become more attuned to our inner signals and messages, and become more aware of what we pay attention to and give meaning to.

2) Observing others in action: We must consciously practice paying more attention to what is not being stated directly but being communicated through gestures, tone, choice of language and through the energy in the person and the group. From this awareness we learn how to turn these insights into action through the use of powerful questions.

3) Extending our Tool Kit: We may need to expand our range of processes to ensure that we are effectively reading and interpreting the cues a group sends, and using this to inform our actions. We may also need structured ways of reflecting on past experiences to learn from whatever happened and begin to transform any injuries felt from these experiences before we work with the group again.

A good analogy for this competence of “reading the invisible” is the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), especially acupuncture. TCM views the body as a whole system, connected and nourished by 12 energy pathways or meridians through which vital energy, called “qi” or “chi”, travels. In this “whole system” approach, the seemingly diverse symptoms we experience can be connected to the same root cause. The practitioner - using intuition, acquired instinct, and reason – knows what to look for to determine the root cause, and thereby, how best to treat the person for maximum effect. This treatment is not aimed at the symptoms themselves, nor on the area that seems to be the hub of the symptoms. Instead, the treatment is aimed at what nourishes and energizes the hub. For example, in the book, “Building A Jade Screen,” by Dr. Hong Zhen Zhu, the acupuncture point called Wind Pool – Gallbladder 20, located at the back of the neck, is described:

“From its name we know that this point is useful for treating anything related to “wind” – colds and flu, dizziness, insomnia, high blood pressure, stiff neck.”

Placing acupuncture needles at this point will unblock energy, or chi, that is not flowing freely throughout the entire body in order to allow the body to heal itself of these symptoms related to the gallbladder.

Groups are also whole systems of energy and spirit. This energy and spirit sometimes gets tangled, resulting in symptoms of conflict, disengagement, dominance, cynicism or fear. First, facilitators need to be aware of these symptoms, which are often not revealed by what people say or agree to do, but demonstrated through non-verbal cues and the “feel” of the group energy that the facilitator gets. Next, we must find the root cause of the symptoms. What is causing this syndrome of symptoms? Often the cause is something that is based on the past experiences of group members – some unhealed injury, a sense of loss, a past agreement that wasn’t really a commitment. Knowing the cause, we then look for that process that will release and channel that impeded energy to flow again and nourish the group to complete its task and build up its relationship. Often this means addressing the issue in an indirect way (to ensure safety and rebuild trust) or going back to previous steps in the process to complete these steps and solidify agreement before moving forward.

The key in both TCM and group facilitation is the practitioner. We are an influential part of the group system. The values we work from, the data we choose to notice and select, the interpretation and meaning we give this data, and how we arrive at our conclusions and actions, all have a huge impact on the group. It is naïve to say that we are neutral, objective and unbiased. We are people, no matter how disciplined we strive to be, and people have prejudices and preferences. Our work is to be more aware of what we bring into the room, how our preferred approach interacts with different perspectives, and what parts of our personality we must try to suppress or emphasize for the good of the group.

I. Observing Self

a) The Values We Work From

Here are a set of values that we have found effective for our development as facilitators. They are derived from a book by Angeles Arrien called “The Four-Fold Way.”

1. Show up and choose to be present: Be fully with people, respect self and others, listen well, be trustworthy and integral, be responsible for what you own, and use power rightly.
2. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning: Acknowledge, accept, and be grateful for all; give and receive with humility and grace; connect deeply with others to soften what is hardened, open what is closed, and embrace what is most feared.
3. Tell the truth without blame or judgment: be authentic and true to our highest self; be honest about ourselves and our situations; be impeccable with our word.
4. Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome: Demonstrate trust, objectivity, perspective, humor, discernment, detachment and openness; work with whatever happens and learn from it; let go of fixed expectations or desires projected onto people, situations or places.

These four values are key components of every behavior, and interact to inform what we say and do. It is important to remember that these values are ideals, ways of being that we strive for but often fall short of. So we must be gentle with ourselves (without blame or judgment) and compassionate with others – acknowledging when we stray, forgiving, and building on our experience.

"These are my principles. If you don't like them I have others." Groucho Marx

b) The Interpretations We Work From: Mental Models

The facilitator is in the best position to make sense of what is happening in a group because we are trained to understand process and group dynamics, we are not engaged in the content of the dialogue, and we know what to look for and pay attention to. To use this power rightly, we need to be conscious of how our minds select and process data to come to conclusions and beliefs. The concept of "Mental Models," described in detail in books like "The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook," can help us understand the inner workings of our own minds better. By better understanding our own inner workings, we are more able to understand how others might be thinking and feeling through their issues.

The model begins and ends with an external event or action – some event observable by all occurs, and this causes an evident response in us. But between the event and the response, the hidden workings of our minds can get into all kinds of things. We go through three major stages when we process information:

1. We perceive data and select what we consider the most important parts.
2. We interpret the data we've selected and give it meaning.
3. We decide how to respond based on our interpretations.

When we act, we either reinforce existing beliefs and patterns, or create new responses. This influences how we will experience future events.

Let's look at each stage in more detail.

1. We perceive what is happening by using our six senses: We receive information directly through experience and our five body senses, indirectly through words and observations, emotionally through our feelings and memories, or intuitively through insight and reflection. As this is more data than we can process, we select what to pay attention to and what to ignore for the time being.

"Believing is seeing." Anonymous

2. We interpret what the data means and what we think about it. We associate past experiences, memories, fears, joys, emotions, learning, counsel, beliefs, etc. to what we perceive. From this we hypothesize what is the right thing for us to do now. This is a critical moment. At this point we can test our assumptions and plan of action with another before acting, or we can act on our unchecked assumptions.

3. *We form our intention and act.* If we act on our assumptions, we reinforce our existing belief system and frame of reference. If we test our hypothesis, we may find additional information that changes our course of action and our belief system, or confirms our beliefs and habits. In either case, we set our intentions and put them into action based on the data selected by us and the interpretation we give this data.

© *Our actions now influence how we perceive future situations.*

This pattern of thinking is referred to as a mental model. Stage two is entirely internal and not visible to others unless we share our thinking. An important aspect is that our interpretations can limit the data we pay attention to in future situations. If repeated, we can become physically present but absent in other ways. We are only aware of what we are expecting and looking for, and disregard other signals.

*"I took a course in speed reading learning to read straight down the middle of the page, and was able to read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It's about Russia."
Woody Allen*

To illustrate how mental models work, we'll use the example of going to the movie, "The Titanic." I saw the same movie as my friends did, but we had very different experiences due to our different mental models. I was expecting a allegorical story about the fate of the ship, and what, for many, the ship symbolized - human achievement, power over nature, and the folly of our arrogance. The data I did get from the movie was, for me, evidence of a sentimental love story that just happened to be set on The Titanic. Here's where my mental models went to work. I associated this experience with past disappointments in Hollywood stories. I assumed that the writers and director thought that movie-goers only wanted escapism, special effects and an excuse to eat an extra-large bag of buttered popcorn. From this interpretation I made some unflattering conclusions about the makers of "The Titanic", and about North American "big ticket" movie-making in general. The term "cheesy" might have slipped out of my mouth. Others who saw the movie enjoyed it thoroughly. The data they selected from the movie was the evidence of a true romance that would not be constrained by class or previous arrangements. This data was associated with their own longings for such a passionate love that only grew stronger with adversity. They concluded that the Titanic provided the right context for this timeless story about our need for unconditional love. They called the movie 'inspiring' and "spectacular." We can see how the conversations I had with my friends about "The Titanic" could easily have led to conflict.

Why is this self-awareness important? Good facilitators must model the behaviours we want to see in others. If we are unaware of our mental models, this can:

- work against our neutrality and objectivity
- disconnect us from what is really happening
- limit what we pay attention to
- lead us to actions that are not best for the situation.
- cause unsafe climates and break trust

© *Four Tools To Manage Our Mental Models*

1. **Reflecting:** Stop action and remember what happened and what responses we had to it. Bring forward our past experiences and learning to this situation.
2. **Focused Questioning:** Ask questions of others to discover what values and mental models they are applying to the situation. Look for common ground.
3. **Connected Listening:** Listen to discover what is going on beneath the surface and to what has meaning for others.
4. **Checking It Out:** Share or assert our interpretations with others and check them out for accuracy and validity before acting on them.

II. Observing Others

a) The Data We Work With: Non-Verbal Cues

*"I don't object to people looking at their watch while I'm speaking. But I strongly object when they start shaking the watches to make sure they are still going."
Lord Birkett*

Non-verbal communication can be defined as the process of sending and receiving *wordless* messages by means of facial expressions, gaze, gestures, postures, and tones of voice. Also included are body positioning, grooming habits, clothing cues and images for marketing. Nonverbal cues include *all* expressive signs, signals and cues (audio, visual, tactile, chemical, psychic, etc.) which are used to send and receive messages apart from speech.

Each of us gives and responds to thousands of nonverbal messages daily. From the morning hug or wave, to our business dress, to facial displays in the meeting room, to the head-nod of our leader, we react to wordless messages emotionally, often without consciously knowing why. Nonverbal behaviors are powerful signals because their details reveal how we relate to one another, and who we think we are.

The attitude of the body at a given time, communicates as much as 55% of what we are thinking, feeling, and placing our attention on. Tone of voice adds another 38%. Words alone contribute only 7% of the meaning. (Statistics from "Healing The Wounds" by David Noer.) If we observe our own body responses to different situations, we get clues as to the power of the information conveyed.

Examples: "Have we ever felt instant fatigue or energy, sadness or joy by being in a situation, with certain people, or discussing a certain topic?" "Do we find ourselves fidgeting, getting pains in parts of your body, or moving towards or away from someone or something?"

Our answers to these questions give valuable pieces of information that indicate our truest natural responses. Being aware of what our own non-verbal cues are and what triggers them is critical for a facilitator. We can be an excellent barometer for the mood and energy of the group. Once we are attuned to our own responses to

different situations and people, we can then better understand what we associate with certain behaviours, and what other perspectives and explanations may also be possible. This awareness informs our line of questioning and next action steps. Likewise, being attuned to the body responses in others can give us signals about how they are responding and whether we need to adapt our approach to connect with them where they are right now.

Non-verbal expressions can reinforce or intensify a statement, or signal a modification, counteraction, or direct contradiction of what is being said. For example, with the statement, "Yes, I'm sure," a lifted shoulder suggests, "I'm not so sure." This dissonance of word and action can reveal misleading, ambiguous, or uncertain areas in dialogue. Using these signals, we know better how to ask questions to bring into the open non-verbalized opinions, doubts, interests or feelings.

Caution: Remember that these signals can be easily misinterpreted, due to our own mental models, our responses to trigger words or situations, cultural differences, or the effect of disabling conditions. Therefore, use these cues as indicators of where to direct our attention and our questions in order to discover what is really happening. In particular, explore areas where the words and actions don't align, or where it just doesn't feel right in our heart or "gut".

1) Facial Gestures

More than any other part of our body, the face reveals our true emotions, opinions, levels of engagement, dispositions, moods, and how we relate to others. Many facial expressions are universal, such as happiness, anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt, and interest. Others are more shaped by cultural inflections, usages and rules, such as smiling, eye-winks, and direct eye contact.

a) The Eyes: Where is the gaze directed, is it steady or erratic? Are the eyes and pupils wide open or are the eyelids slitted and the pupils small? Do the eyes have a "hard" or "soft" edge to them? What feelings, images and self-talk do we get when we observe this? Do we feel bigger, smaller, on par, better, worse, alerted, etc. when confronted with these eyes?

b) The Mouth: Is the mouth smiling, frowning, pouting, snarling, or sneering? Are the lips tight, is the mouth working nervously, or is it relaxed? Do the cues make us feel the person is being authentic or trying to deceive or fool us?

2) Body Gestures

The position of the body and the activity of certain parts (e.g. hands, fingers, arms, feet, toes) sends strong messages to the observer. Is the person trying to appear bigger or smaller? Is the body facing us squarely, or angled away? Is it moving towards us or away from us? Are the shoulders square, shrugged, or relaxed? Are the hands emphasizing what is being said with mime, or fidgeting in ways that seem

disconnected to the words? Is the person needing to touch, pull, stroke, pinch, or wring face parts and the lower arms? Do these body movements make us feel dominated by, submitted to, respected, discounted, more loved, feared, more convinced, or more doubtful?

These different face and body gestures can work together to intensify a disposition and reinforce a statement or action. They also can appear to be inconsistent. This can signal us to ask questions and listen to/watch for the responses we get, so that we all can discover what is really happening. Our intuition will aid us in understanding what all the factors mean when they are put together.

3) Tone Of Voice

The quality or tone of the voice conveys a great deal about the speaker, up to 38% of the real message. It is defined as the manner in which a verbal statement is presented, e.g., its rhythm, breathiness, hoarseness, or loudness. People unconsciously adapt to each other's voice tones. Tone can affect our level of arousal (fight, flight or freeze) and our mood and disposition towards the speaker. It may also carry social information, as in a sarcastic, superior, or submissive manner of speaking. Many voice qualities are universal across all human cultures (though they are also subject to cultural shaping). Essentially, all voice tones reflect three basic sound modes: low-pitched, low and loud, or high-pitched.

Is the tone of voice low pitch and even, with lower volume? Is it low pitch and loud or with rising volume and harshness? Is the tone loud on certain words? Is it high pitch and soft or just high pitch at the end of statements? How is silence used? When do throat clearings, or "uhs" and "hms" occur –when speaking and when listening? Does this tone of voice make us want to fight, to flee, to freeze, to fade out, to go along with, or to engage?

(See <http://members.aol.com/nonverbal2/> for more specific details on reading non-verbal cues.)

4) The Inner And Energy Cues

It is critical for facilitators to pay attention to their own internal cues. Our inner responses to group energies inform us about what is really happening. This occurs in at least two ways:

- We feel personal anxiety, insecurity, confusion, lack of focus, off-center, etc. If we feel this way, the likelihood is that others feel this way as well.
- We pick up the energies and moods of others. These get translated into our own internal cues, such as the impulse to fight or flight.

Because energy signals are subtle cues (often only hinted at by non-verbal cues), we either ignore them or are not sure what to make of them. This can lead us to press on with our agenda without making the necessary adaptations to serve the participants best.

Some internal responses are innate and instinctive, like the fight or flight responses. Some are inspired gifts received directly through our intuition. Others are acquired or learned instincts. One theory is that we associate memories with different parts of our body and store them in our memory with these connections in tact. With certain external stimuli, we recall the body feeling and emotions we associated with that past situation—e.g. a sound, a sight, a touch, an image, a word, a behaviour, etc. This happens much more quickly than our thinking process. At this point our intuition serves us better than our reasoning faculties in trying to understand what the data means, and what our “higher” response might be.

What is our body telling us about the energy here? What images are we getting regarding the situation or the people? What is the self-talk saying? How does this inform us? Does it move us away from the people or towards them?

5) Language Cues

There are also important signals in the way sentences are framed and in the choice of terms. This is from the study of neuro-linguistic programming. We will focus only on the motivational direction that the language used might indicate. The words we use signal the type of motivation that is predominating at the moment. We either move towards some positive goal, end or consequences (e.g. the carrot), or away from some negative situation or consequences (e.g. the stick). Often our truer motivations are voiced after words like: “but”, “because”, “and”.

Toward Language:

“Toward” language focuses on the desired end. This can indicate that people using this language are energized by their goals and use their time and resources to achieve this goal. Sometimes “toward” people can be unrealistic about challenges, risks and obstacles. “Toward” language includes words like: attain, obtain, have, include, get, enable us to, benefits, pros, advantages, here’s what it’ll look like when it is done, what is gained, what is wanted.

Away From Language:

“Away From” patterns emphasize what people need to get away from or avoid. Sentences are often framed as “if, then”. “*If we don’t reach productivity targets, then we’ll have to forego training or vacations.*” “Away from” people in a group are good at problem solving, risk definition, boundary clarification, defining the impacts and consequences of decisions, and grounding dreams in reality. There is a tendency for people with this bias to have difficulty maintaining focus on the future goals and what it takes to achieve them. Crisis management is an easier role for them to play. “Away From” language includes: solve, find out what’s wrong, won’t have to, prevent, avoid, fix, not have to deal with, get rid of, it is not good enough, cons, here’s what we need to watch for so we don’t get in trouble or have problems, exclude or drop.

a) Examples: Often statements include a mix of “toward” and “away from” signals. For example, if we asked a group, “*What is your idea of a supportive environment?*” we might get answers like:

Toward “*We would do satisfying work and be recognized for it.*”

Away From “*We wouldn’t have our boss over our shoulders and ignoring all our suggestions.*”

Mixed “*We would be able to do more on our own initiative, but not be punished for making honest mistakes.*”

In the mixed example, the phrase after “but” needs exploring to see what the real motivation is.

Q. “*Why is it important not to be punished?*”

A. “*Because we want to be creative and take some risks to do our work better.*”

III. Extending Our Tool Kit

Knowing what signals to look for in ourselves and others, and accounting for the influence of mental models, facilitators now have the solid ground upon which to build new activities and processes to help groups move forward. The primary tools for this development are questioning and listening (also referred to as harvesting) skills. We will emphasize the importance of crafting effective questions and the thinking process that will help us develop good questions. Finally we will briefly discuss how to harvest the best ideas from the raw data generated by the group.

1. Crafting Effective Focus Questions

An effective focusing question will generate the desired type and level of information, and set the foundation for group synergy. The success of the intervention will be directly related to how well we craft our focus questions. Focus questions are used throughout the process for specific purposes.

a) Discipline in Crafting Questions

Focus relates to discipline, and this means:

- Being very clear as to what *outcome* we want from the dialogue. These outcomes can be one or more of the following: *task* (goal achievement), *relationship* (quality of interaction), or *conceptual* (learning).
- Knowing what method or *process* we are using to achieve that outcome and what to look for, listen for, “feel” for that will indicate that we are progressing.
- Being aware of which *step* of the process we are at and how it fits with the overall intentions and methods of the process.
- Working within a set *time* limit and keeping the depth of the discussion consistent with the time frame. Note that this section pertains to the design and planning of an intervention. Rough guidelines for timing are needed to give us a general direction and to know what may be feasible in a given workshop. Once we begin to deliver the intervention, we must facilitate whatever is happening and needs to happen for the group. Then we adjust our rough timelines accordingly, “on the fly”.

b) Qualities Of Effective Questions

Effective focus questions have six key qualities, they are:

- *Clear*— There is no confusion as to what the group will be doing. A newcomer should be able to join the dialogue without further guidance.
- *Simple*— Addresses one topic and one step at a time. Less is more.
- *Grounded*—Centered in what is meaningful and motivating for those involved.
- *Open*—Framed in a way that opens up a topic and invites participation, new and diverse perspectives, and the opportunity to bring our best selves forward.
- *Unbiased*— Uses language that does not imply a preference for a specific answer, or a set way of thinking, or a particular way of doing things.
- *Relevant*—I.e. Connected to the intent of the client and the participants.

"A conclusion is the place where you got tired of thinking." Steven Wright

We will elaborate here on three broad applications that are the framework for most interventions: future-oriented, present-oriented and past-oriented focus questions.

c) Future Orientation (Planning Ahead)

In designing interventions, we need to craft effective questions that will focus the group's attention on the right topic and launch the desired generation of ideas and dialogue. We use future-oriented questions primarily to:

i) Assess a situation and ensure that all key perspectives and information is used to inform the purpose and design of an intervention, and set a clear focus for the work.

☑ This includes questioning our own assumptions, biases and images that we hold of the people involved. *"What am I bringing into the situation that will help the people achieve their goals, and what might hinder the people in their work?"*

☑ It requires us to ask questions of the client to ensure that we and they clearly understand what we are going to work on, what the desired outcomes will look like when achieved, and how the results will be communicated and used. *"What symptoms are you noticing now? What significant events or changes have happened to the group that may have had an impact on performance? What shift are you looking for – what is your image of success? Who will feel they might gain from such a shift, and who will feel they'll lose?"*

☑ And our assessment includes the perspective of the participants. *"If I were a participant, what would I need to get out of the workshop to make it more valuable than the time at work that I've given up? What would need to be in place to make the climate safe to be honest and creative?"*

ii) Launch a process or a new step in the process. Usually the work of a group follows this flow:

- ☑ generate ideas (*e.g. What are the opportunities and challenges in...?*),
- ☑ synthesize ideas, (*Which ideas have a common theme or spirit?*)
- ☑ prioritize/decide on what to act on, (*Given our agreed on criteria of ..., which themes do we need to focus on?*)
- ☑ plan the action, (*Given our agreed on vision for the plan of ..., what action steps do we need to take? Which action steps are closely related in type or nature? Who will be accountable for doing this? By when? How will we know when we are done to the standard we've envisioned? What evidence will tell us we are done? How will we celebrate successes and learn from whatever happens?*)
- ☑ debrief the experience, (*What specifically happened during this work we did together? What did we learn from the experience? How can we apply our learning to make our work better in the future?*)
- ☑ review the action. (*What worked? What needs improvement? Of these improvements, which are the key ones to focus on? What needs to be done to make these key improvements?*)

✦ **Decide on The Scope And Depth Of The Question:**

In crafting our launch questions we need to determine what scope and what depth we need our group to think at. A *wide angle scope* question directs attention solely to where we want to be at the end of our generation of ideas. For example: "We want to end up with ideas about customer service?" The wide angle scope is effective for broad creative thinking. A *narrow angle scope* question is similar to wide angle, but it generates ideas within a smaller boundary. For example: "What ideas do we have about the reception area?"

Whether wide or narrow angle in scope, these questions don't restrict our thinking to one realm, such as *better* workshops for staff, *improved* signage. Use of comparatives pushes our thinking to a more analytical problem-solving or continuous improvement approach. This kind of thinking is called the *specific outcome* focus.

The *specific outcome* question is the more familiar kind of focus when work groups get together. It launches our thinking and moves us toward something specific that we want to achieve as a result of our group work: fixing a problem, making a decision, planning, etc. For example: "How could we improve the reception area?"

Often the process will start with a wide angle focus to air all the issues, then get more specific. This first step can be done in group or through pre-group work such as surveys, interviews, etc. The group must have clarity on the task and the issues related to it before it can be effective.

↪ **Test Drive The Question:**

The final step in designing launch questions is to “test drive” the questions we intend to use on the client and on unsuspecting people like colleagues, friends and family. “If you were asked this question at work, what responses or answers would you give?” This gives you feedback on how people might interpret the question and what kind of thinking the question elicits. Based on this feedback we may need to re-do our questions and then test drive the new drafts until we get the focus and quality of responses that are needed for the situation.

d) Present Orientation (On The Fly Adjustments)

It is easy for people to “get stuck” in patterns of thinking or in hesitations before they cross a threshold. This calls for questions that shift perspectives and engage creativity in order to *re-frame* an activity or *re-focus* a group that is dividing its energy or putting energy in areas where it may slow down progress. The opportunities to use focus questions that generate creative responses or new perspectives most often occur within a process step. These type of questions serve to open up rigid patterns of thinking and look at issues with new eyes.

“OK, so what's the speed of dark?” Steven Wright

i) Test Questions:

With test questions we want to challenge whether the current way of doing or thinking about things is still the best way for us in our current situation. It is not a criticism or an attack on what is being done currently. If our current practice is still best for us we’ll keep it, if not we need to change it. There need not be an evident problem or something to fix. We may just want to know if there is a better way. Tests are simple but require discipline. We start by listing the features of a thing or process, or the patterns of our thinking, and then asking: “Why are things the way they are?” For example: “Why does each person have one vote?”

Three sub-categories of test questions add even more focus:

☑ Questions that test *necessity*, such as, “What would happen if we remove this matter/step/process/ingredient?” The answers can result in a confirmation of current practices, or lead to the removal of things that waste time and energy, or initiate the improvement of something.

☑ Questions that test *validity*, such as, “Why do we do it this way?” and, “What would happen if we were free to interpret these demands differently?” The responses to these kinds of questions can result in: the reasons are valid and we have to do as we do; the reasons are valid but there may be a better way of addressing them; the reasons are valid but we can re-interpret the demands they place on us; or, the reasons are no longer valid and we can change what we do without major implications.

☑ Questions that test *preference*, such as, “What other possible ways of doing this could work?”

"What's another word for Thesaurus?"- Steven Wright

ii) Stretch Questions:

These are the questions that look at an issue from a different angle and force us out of our usual way of thinking. There are three steps to the process.

1. Put down something we take for granted, something that is reasonable for us to expect. E.g. Staff serve customers.
2. Reword the idea using an entirely different perspective.– either negating, reversing or envisioning. For example (in order): "Staff do not serve customers"; "Customers serve staff"; or "(IW) I wish we had time to build more of a relationship with customers".
3. Now play with the idea "What if this new situation were the case?" and generate new options and ideas based on this new, possible scenario.

iii) Four Areas To Consider:

In testing our current thinking ("why do we think/believe that this is so?") and stretching our thinking ("what if?"), we need to consider four key areas to ensure that our work is authentic and that the results will work in the environment that the participants must operate within. Keeping these four areas in mind throughout the process helps us with our line of questioning and timing.

Assumptions: These are the invisible patterns of thinking, associations, generalizations, and beliefs that can dominate our way of seeing the world. "What assumptions are we making here?" Some assumptions may be: that technology can replace people at a lower cost; that teams make better decisions; that generalists (multi-skilled workers) provide better service than specialists; that people prefer to work in a looser, less hierarchical structure; that workers are not self-motivated and self-responsible, etc. Our assumptions can have a big influence on what we do and what we don't do. Note that we all make assumptions. We just need to be clear on what interpretations, biases and beliefs are operating for us in a given situation.

Boundaries: These are the external, imposed limits that form the boundaries for our creative thinking. "What are the known outer limits within which we can freely think and make decisions?" Examples are: regulations, politics, agreements with other parties, legislation, specific policies, our level of authority, our work culture, our role, etc. Everything in this life has boundaries and, contrary to many beliefs, these limits actually help our creativity by giving it focus and purpose.

Essentials: "What must be included in any outcome?" For example: the result must be legal, it must be ethical, it must be perceived as fair, it must match our core values, it must improve customer service, etc.

Dangers: "What do we need to stay away from?" These are things that may be embarrassing if they were made public, or ideas that could hurt other people or become an obstacle to other parts of the system.

e) Past Orientation (After The Activity)

*"We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on our experience."
Thiagi*

Learning and improvement comes from reflecting on our experiences and using these insights for future action.

i) Group Debrief:

The group we are working with needs to debrief an activity and learn from this experience. As stated earlier, the structure of this debrief is to:

⇒ first have the participants describe what happened in the experience – events, feelings, motives and mental models at work, the reactions of others;

⇒ then draw out the key learning points – focusing on those ideas that generate passion for the people, and helping people connect ideas;

⇒ then explore “what if” scenarios to deepen the learning by seeing how the principles work when different factors are at play – cause and effect thinking;

⇒ then help people think through how they will apply the learning when they resume their daily work patterns – identifying what one or two things they will commit to practicing in the next 3 weeks, and what needs to be in place for them to apply the learning.

ii) Facilitator's Reflection:

As well, facilitators must continue to learn from our experience and use this learning to inform our future work. Sometimes this reflection is critical to begin to heal and transform experiences that hurt us or brought out the dark side of our character and resulted in us hurting or confusing others. One way of doing this reflection is to:

⇒ Remember the experience and the key people involved as accurately as possible, and replay the scene in our minds. Imagine ourselves back in the moment that we want to learn from.

⇒ While doing this replay, we act as non-judgmental observers of ourselves and others, and we record our observations. *“What did I notice? What signals did I get that told me what was happening? How did I feel about what was happening (e.g. I felt ..., using one-word adjectives like angry, relieved, etc.? How did I interpret and give meaning to these signals and my feelings associated with the signals? What image did I form of the people? What action did I take as a result? What resulted from my action?”*

⇒ Once we've recalled and recorded the situation, we need to consider if we could act better in the future – *“Are these the kinds of results I want to effect? What part*

of this was I responsible for? What assumptions or beliefs did I act from that need to be revisited? What other actions might I have tried?"

*"Yes, honey...Just squeeze your rage up into a bitter little ball and release it at an appropriate time, like that day I hit the referee with the whiskey bottle."
Homer Simpson*

⇒ Finally, we need to transform the experience so that we can move forward and act from our very best motives and intentions. *"Can I give thanks for and learn from everything that happens, even things that seem painful at the time? What do I need to forgive in myself and in others in order to move forward? What do I need to focus on to strengthen and affirm myself? What do I need to start doing or stop doing to be a more compassionate and effective facilitator?"*

2. Harvesting Key Ideas To Move Them Forward

"This is like deja vu all over again." Yogi Berra

What do we pay attention to once we've generated ideas? How do we move from raw data to something more specific or more useful in making decisions and taking action? Too often facilitators continue to rehash ground already covered because we cannot recognize the value of what the group has already done. This wastes time and depletes energy.

Good harvesting practice is based on two disciplines:

- a) Being clear on what outcomes you are working towards
- b) Ensuring that an accurate and visible record of the ideas is kept.

Facilitators need to be more conscious of what to look for in the recorded ideas that tell us where the potential "nuggets" are. By "nuggets" we mean those ideas that express what is most meaningful and relevant, and that contain clues to the solution or action that will be most effective for the problem or issue being worked on.

The harvesting process is like panning for gold, as we must sift through the material and sort out what kind of responses are there to work with. Then we must extract the "nuggets" and make them work for us.

*"Talking is not an end in itself, it is only useful as a prelude to action."
Graham Greene*

To begin with, this discipline may seem difficult. However, as we get more practice these processes get more instinctive and fluid. When we are learning new methods, it helps to try and organize the concepts and ideas into a more structured "map" to follow, even though, in reality, life doesn't happen in such a structured way. This map does give us guidelines to keep ourselves and the group on track, and to help us find our way back to the path after we have deviated.

The following chart gives some ideas of what to look and listen for in the ideas that have been generated and recorded by the group.

