

Self-awareness, mindfulness and action inquiry



Our facilitation approach and style aims to build skills of self-reflection and mindfulness in individuals and teams. We often refer to this as 'sitting on your own shoulder' and observing, understanding and adjusting your own actions 'in the moment'.

Self-reflection and self-awareness can be very difficult to cultivate. Here are some tools and techniques which may help.

A 'toolkit' for reflection and action inquiry

1. **Interrupt habits:** some spiritual teachers say that many of us go through our lives as if sleepwalking, operating in habitual patterns of which we are aware. Interrupting these provide a space in which new choices can be made. One way of interruption is the 'stop' exercise, creating a pause just before any action. Another is to imagine a parrot on your shoulder saying 'are you awake?'
2. **Attentional skills:** cultivate attentional skills – meditation, Tai Chi, the martial arts, the gestalt 'right now I am aware' exercise are all ways of developing capacity to notice moment to moment to moment.
3. **Carry an intention to inquire:** the discipline of declaring to yourself and others that you intend to attend to a particular issue can itself be powerful.
4. **Inner arcs of attention to purpose, frame and theory:** noticing how you take your purposes into different situations; noticing the frames you bring; noticing the theories you adopt. One way to do this is through journaling which can help bring less conscious patterns into awareness
5. **Outer arcs of attention to action, response outcome:** noticing how you behave and how others respond. Some of this can be done through self-observation, but audio and video tape recordings and feedback from 'friends willing to act as enemies' can be a great help.
6. **Personal cycles of action and reflection:** the discipline of formal cycles of action and reflection can be followed at a personal level. Many of the suggestions above – meditation, journaling, listening to tapes of yourself will provide the basis for such cycling.
7. **Review conversation in two-column format:** writing in one column what was actually said or done in a meeting, and in the other your unspoken thoughts, feelings, and observations can help to uncover unspoken assumptions and identify patterns.

8. **Experiment with 'frame, advocate, illustrate, inquire' in conversations** (see page 3)

9. **Use the ladder of inference to get at underlying assumptions:**

the ladder of inference is another way of starting from observable data and moving down toward underlying assumptions (see page 4)



10. **The learning pathways grid** similarly is an analytic framework to help identify the source of mismatch between what we intend and what actually happens

Items 1, 4 and 5 in the toolkit on page 1 talk about 'cultivating awareness' of your actions. Here are some questions to ask yourself which help you to do that:

These are reflective questions to ask oneself in given situations, usually involving interactions with others (eg in team meetings, community meetings, interactions with colleagues and team members, in high-pressure situations)

Who am I? What is important? What is worthwhile engaging in?

What framework of thinking and feeling do I bring to my life and work?

What creative and distorting perspectives do I bring?

Am I stuck in one frame of seeing the world?

What is the quality of my behaviour? Do I have a range? Is it congruent with my purpose?

Can I increase the quality of the conversation?

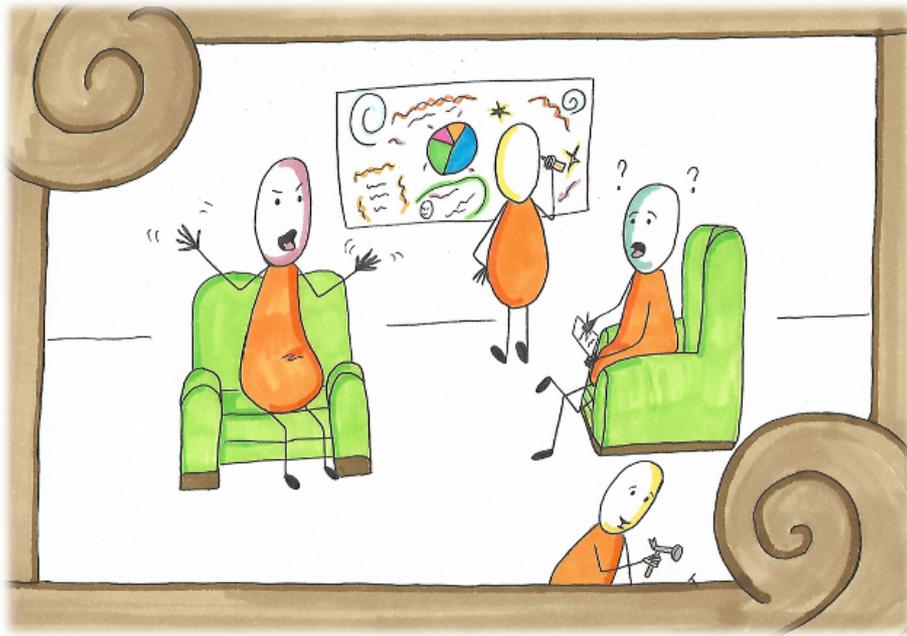
Am I awake to what is happening with me and in the world around me?

How do I act now?

What is happening and what part am I playing?

Can I recognise and surface what is habitual, unaware and repetitive in my being and behaviour?

Bill Torbert's Four Parts of Speech



The 'four parts of speech' is a simple model to guide us in the way we express ourselves to others. A balanced verbal communication has all four elements in it although not necessarily in the order they are presented below – all four could occur several times in one conversation.

As well as paying attention to your own communication, it is also useful to listen to other people and noticing which part of speech is over or under used. For example some people advocate a lot, which can be perceived as forceful, strident. Others may illustrate more than anything else, which means their speech tends to concentrate on minutiae and detail, rather than the bigger picture.

These are the four parts of speech:

Framing:



Making clear what the context is, or outlining what you are going to be doing or saying. You frame at the beginning of a presentation or workshop to set the scene so people know what to expect. It's about situating the conversation and positioning yourself eg 'this is a consultation' or 'this is what we are going to do'.

You can also use framing to summarise what someone has said or to bring together themes.

Advocating:

This is stating your intent, such as 'what I want to do is.' and giving your opinion or stating your case or preferences. Making suggestions and putting forward proposals is also included in Advocating.





Illustrating:

Giving examples and painting pictures, showing what you mean. The ‘for instance’ part of your speech.

Inquiring:

Asking the person/people you are talking to ‘are you ok?’, ‘is that OK?’. Entering into a dialogue with the listener(s). ‘How does that sound to you?’



If you were then to agree on some ‘next steps’ then that would become a ‘reframing’ and the process would repeat itself.

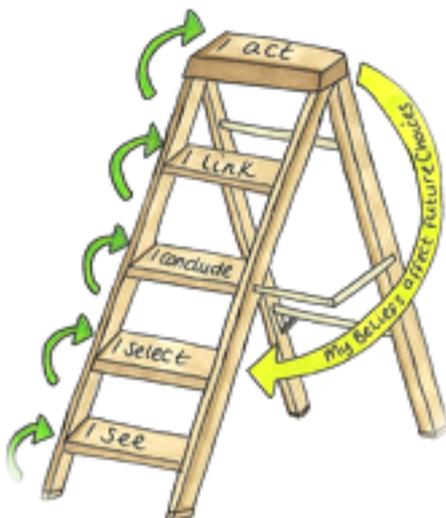
Framing and advocating are skills congruent with controlling boundaries or taking the lead. Illustrating and inquiring are skills more congruent with making connections, caring for and deferring to others.

An idea lacking in framing and advocacy is more likely to get overlooked in general discussion than one presented with those attributes.

The Ladder of Inference

A model developed by Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1995)

The ladder of inference is a series of steps that shows the process people go through as they pick up signals from situations they find themselves in, read into things or draw conclusions from those signals. The ladder of inference helps surface these assumptions and increase awareness of them.



Decide what to do/how to behave

Link that to other opinions/theories we hold

What we infer (conclude) from this data

Select what we notice (and don't notice)

Observable ‘data’: a conversation, a newspaper article, body language, facial expression, eye contact

An example:

An interaction between a coach and a client:

Elizabeth arrives for an appointment with Sal about her business idea. Sal says hello and as he does so, he both smiles warmly and takes a quick look at his watch. Elizabeth, who is not self-confident and tends not to think of herself as significant, notices the glance at the watch, rather than Sal's smile. She assumes Sal isn't really very interested in her idea, and wants to limit the time they spend in the meeting. She loses confidence and enthusiasm for the idea and doesn't have much to say about it. The meeting ends quite quickly.

The ladder shows how an existing frame (I am not very important) can influence what data we attend to (the glance at the watch) and what inferences we draw from that data (Sal is busy or not interested). Automatic inferences can lead to undesirable results (Sal and Elizabeth miss a chance to connect).