



# talking about...

November 2009

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

## Assumptions and Learning

*"If we all worked on the assumption that what is accepted as true is really true, there would be little hope of advance."*

... Orville Wright (1871 - 1948) US inventor and aviation pioneer

Having been involved in the world of ontological coaching for over fifteen years, there have been two key themes that seemed to have shown up over and over again. The first is the unquestioned assumptions that people hold that lead them to see the world in a certain way. The second, which often stems from our unquestioned assumptions, is the requests and ultimately the promises that are not made in order to create a difference with others. Today, we would like to focus on our unquestioned assumptions.

An assumption is a story about something or someone that we take as being true. As we have seen many times before in our newsletters, if we believe something to be true then we generally do not question it and continue to interpret and act on the basis of that truth. As coaches, we constantly deal with the challenges people face. One of our key strategies in helping people deal with those challenges lies in testing their assumptions. Although, this may sound an obvious approach, most people do not delve into their assumptions with any depth, particularly if they don't take the time for reflection.

To explore the power of assumptions let's look at a simple example. In many ways, a coach's work is to help people learn. One of the basic assumptions people hold is the meaning of "learning". When asked, the vast majority people will offer an answer such as "learning is getting to know or understand something". In other words, if you know about it then you have learnt it. This is not surprising as most of us have had exposure to a traditional approach to learning through our educational system that is largely about getting to know something. In the world of coaching, this definition of learning is insufficient. Why?

Well, think about driving a car. You could spend years reading about cars and what is involved in driving them, without ever getting behind a wheel. As a result, you may know about driving without actually being able to drive. Driving a car involves the experience of actually driving, not simply knowing about driving. This applies to any domain. Our work often focuses on leadership. Most people in leadership have been on leadership programs of one sort or another and to varying degrees "know" about leadership. Yet many of them do not apply what they know. They do not see this as a further area of learning.

This can be seen in the way organisations treat learning. Based on the generally unquestioned assumption that learning is about acquiring knowledge, the majority of an organisation's learning investments seems to go towards acquiring more knowledge and much less to the ongoing application of what people know. As a result, a lot of the investment in learning does not translate expected changes in habitual attitudes and

actions. Yet, these habitual changes only occur through practice.

For the coach, this often manifests in a barrier to learning where the client holds that "I already know this" and therefore they have nothing to learn. Accordingly, one of the key challenges that often show up for a coach is to shift the basic assumption about the definition of learning.

Although, we have touched on the subject of learning here, questioning assumptions can be a very powerful way of opening up new interpretations and conversations. If you are having a challenge of any sort, we invite you to question your assumptions and what assumptions are shared with others. You may well be surprised about the obviousness of the breakdowns created by your unquestioned assumptions.

*"Never assume the obvious is true."*

... William Safire (1929 - ) US journalist and author

## A Bit of Golf Humour ...

*From an early age, one of my great loves has been the game of golf, so I couldn't resist the opportunity to share some golfing humour. Thanks to Richard who sent these gems my way ...*

A husband and wife are on the 9th green when suddenly she collapses from a heart attack!

"Help me dear," she groans to her

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husband.

The husband calls 000 on his mobile, talks for a few minutes, picks up his putter and lines up his putt.

His wife raises her head off the green and stares at him.

"I'm dying here and you're putting?"

"Don't worry dear," says the husband calmly, "they found a doctor on the second hole and he's coming to help you."

"Well, how long will it take for him to get here?" she asks feebly.

"No time at all," says her husband. "Everybody's already agreed to let him play through."

A gushy reporter told Phil Michelson, "You are spectacular; your name is synonymous with the game of golf. You really know your way around the course. What's your secret?"

Michelson replied, "The holes are numbered."

A young man and a priest are playing together.

At a short par-3 the priest asks, "What are you going to use on this hole, my son?"

The young man says, "An 8-iron, father. How about you?"

The priest says, "I'm going to hit a soft seven and pray."

The young man hits his 8-iron and puts the ball on the green.

The priest tops his 7-iron and dribbles the ball out a few yards.

The young man says, "I don't know about you, father, but in my church, when we pray, we keep our head down."

Police are called to an apartment and find a woman holding a bloody 5-iron standing over a lifeless man.

The detective asks, "Ma'am, is that your husband?"

"Yes," says the woman.

"Did you hit him with that golf club?"

"Yes, yes, I did." The woman begins to sob, drops the club, and puts her hands on her face.

"How many times did you hit him?"

"I don't know, five, six, maybe seven times.....just put me down for a five."

A golfer teed up his ball on the first tee, took a mighty swing and hit his ball into a clump of trees.

He found his ball and saw an opening between two trees he thought he could hit through.

Taking out his 3-wood, he took a mighty swing.

The ball hit a tree, bounced back, hit him in the forehead and killed him.

As he approached the gates of Heaven, St. Peter asked, "Are you a good golfer?"

The man replied: "Got here in two, didn't I?"

The bride was escorted down the aisle and when she reached the altar, the groom was standing there with his golf bag and clubs at his side.

She said: "What are your golf clubs doing here?"

He looked her right in the eye and said, "This isn't going to take all day, is it?"

***"Character matters; leadership descends from character."***

... Rush Limbaugh (1951 - ) US talk show host, commentator and author

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