

Challenging Assumptions: Facilitator Notes



Thinking Skills that enable us to break old patterns and establish new ones

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW



Challenging Assumptions is a 20-minute, small group activity that explores some of the thinking skills that enable us to break old patterns and establish new ones and is an interesting and engaging way of helping people to distinguish the difference between useful assumptions and those that limit potential. It is also an excellent introduction to training in creative thinking, creative problem-solving and innovation skills and a challenging 'warm-up' activity for a problem solving or planning team, in advance of tackling 'real-life' problems and solutions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES



Individuals will explore the nature of assumptions and their limiting effect through working on this practical 'puzzle'. It explores in particular how individuals can follow assumptions unconsciously and how sometimes it is important to challenge whether deeply held assumptions are restricting creative and innovative thinking. It can be used to ask individuals to explore strategies for challenging their own thinking processes, and also to consider sensitive and positive ways of doing this in group situations.

ACTIVITY BACKGROUND



Human beings seek to fit new knowledge or new challenges into existing mindsets. Many of us have probably found ourselves navigating from a map and have tried to convince ourselves that what we are seeing on the map matches the features on the ground, even when this is clearly not the case. Rather than admit we are lost, we argue either that "the map must be wrong" or we distort the information we are receiving: "They must have planted those trees since the map was printed!".

Assumptions are deep-rooted and, however much we may wish to come to a situation or problem with an open mind, the likelihood is that we are bringing previous experience and influences into the new scenario. When we hear ourselves saying, "I've tried that before...it won't work" or "People will love that...it went down really well last time" we are suggesting to ourselves that this situation replicates a previous one and that the outcomes will be the same. This, of course isn't always true.

Assumptions come from our cultural, social, biological and intellectual heritage. We have created a map of the world that we use to perceive the world around us and to protect ourselves. This in turn, influences our behaviour. Assumptions also come from individual experiences: an individual who has worked under a series of bullying managers may assume that anyone moving into a management role automatically begins to abuse their role power.

Assumptions are reflected in our language, in the metaphors we use and in the unconscious choices that we make. Even when we try to be consciously aware of our assumptions, we find ourselves applying them anyway. Some assumptions work, most of the time. By and large, if I assume that traffic will stop at a red light, this is the case. However, on the occasion when this assumption does not hold true, I am likely to be in significant danger!

Therefore, in most situations we check our assumptions - waiting to ensure the traffic has, in fact, stopped before crossing the road. However, this becomes more difficult when we do not believe that we are making any assumptions. What, then, forces us to challenge our thinking unless we do it consciously as part of a structured development process?

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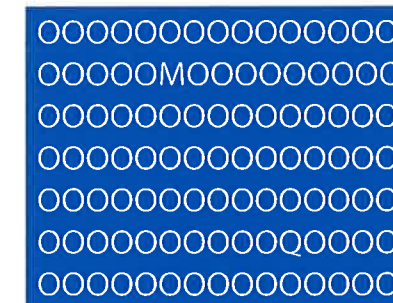
Many assumptions limit our potential to move forward or to experiment with something new. In organisational terms this leads to failure to recognise and use individual potential because we assume actions in the past will be repeated in the future, unwillingness to take risks because a similar risk failed in the past, inability to solve an on-going problem because we can't see the underlying causes.....

In contrast, unchecked assumptions also lead to unjustified enthusiasm and the setting of inappropriate goals. Assuming that major new clients will turn up, the bank will extend the loan or that the great new idea is just around the corner can be equally as damaging.

Our natural human tendency to do this is illustrated in familiar puzzles, jokes and challenges in which the solution is found only when we are able to leave those established ideas behind and break through the limitations we are creating.

Examples of these puzzles that illustrate limiting assumptions are below.

Consider Figure 1:



After looking briefly at the field of letters, one notices the letter M nestled among the Os. What is harder to see is the letter Q because our eyes trick us into believing that all round letters in the field must be Os. The assumption that all round letters are Os limits our ability to perceive the difference between the letters at the bottom of the field. Limiting assumptions can be very destructive.

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ACTIVITY MATERIALS

Each toolbox contains four puzzles allowing four groups of 3 to 6 learners to work on each puzzle simultaneously, comparing and contrasting approaches to 'Challenging Assumptions'. Do not mix pieces between each puzzle - keep them separate in the reusable polythene bags

The materials supplied with each set of this activity include:

- 4 (red, blue, green, orange) x A4 sized completed puzzles (each containing 22 x wooden puzzle pieces)
- 1 x set of Facilitator Notes
- 1 x A4 Box



ACTIVITY TIMESCALE

Although learning groups may differ, below is a typical timescale to expect for most groups:

0-5 minutes	Following verbal brief allow group to work without further intervention (typically turning all pieces painted side up and attempting to join pieces together)
5-10 minutes	If no progress is being made coach the group to determine what assumptions they made, or you observed (the turning over of all pieces) and ask them to challenge this
10-15 minutes	Through trial and error, or by creating a 'new pattern' the group completes the puzzle, or has identified what needs to be done to complete it.
15-20 minutes	Activity review and summary of learning

SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY

Before beginning the exercise the pieces of each puzzle should be separated so that the final pattern cannot be seen and prepared in the bag for 'tipping out' onto the group work area. As the pieces fall they should form a random pile of pieces both 'painted' and 'non-painted' side up.

Each polythene bag contains a separate puzzle, so use more than 1 x puzzle if you have more than 6 participants (3 to 6 participants per group/ puzzle is ideal), with each group having a separate working area.



Identify at least one 'non-playing' observer per group. They should be briefed separately and privately as per Step 2 in the 'Activity Briefing'

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BRIEFING THE ACTIVITY

Step 1:

The pieces of the puzzle are tipped out onto a table in a random pile. Issue the following verbal brief:

"Using all the pieces provided, complete the puzzle. All pieces will join."

Additional clues may be given at the facilitator's discretion during the exercise such as:

'The pieces will all join together very closely as they are laser-cut'

'The pieces will join to form an A4 sized rectangle.'

Step 2:

Take aside one or two observers and ask them to make notes of the process that the participants use. Leave at least 2 players per group. Ask them to pay particular attention to the language that is used, the physical actions and movement of shapes and the sequence of events that occur in the first few minutes.

Step 3:

Allow the participants to work for about 5 minutes. Then ask them to describe back to you the process they have been through in the task so far. Compare their descriptions with the notes made by the observers.

Ask,

- What, if any, assumptions have you made so far in the exercise?
- What, if any, assumptions have you tested out?
- What, if any, assumptions are you still working with?

Examples we have encountered of the assumptions people make are:

- This is a jigsaw and conventional 'jigsaw rules' apply
- The coloured faces of these pieces are 'the right way up'
- The non-coloured side is the 'wrong side'
- Jigsaws have straight edges and are square or rectangular
- There are four right-angled pieces so they are likely to be corners
- The puzzle is 2-dimensional
- There is significance in the spaces between pieces
- There is an acceptable solution and we will be able to find it



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BRIEFING THE ACTIVITY



Step 4:

- i) If the participants have made good progress and have challenged their own assumptions, ask them to continue to consider the kind of questions they asked themselves and the things they said and did that helped them to avoid making unhelpful assumptions. What process did they follow and how can they learn from this?
- ii) If the participants were not making progress but now recognise the assumptions they were making, ask them to go back into the exercise.

Ask them to challenge those assumptions in order to make progress. Ask them to try new ways of thinking in order to move on.

- iii) If the participants do not recognise that they are making any assumptions and are failing to make progress, ask them what they could do differently in order to be able to perceive this task in a different way.

Ask them to explain why they are working in the way that they are e.g. if they have all the pieces coloured-side up, or the 'corners' identified and whether they could work in a different way.

Step 5:

As the puzzle develops, check whether any 'new' assumptions are being made. For example, having seen a pattern begin to emerge, do the participants assume that this pattern will be consistent throughout the task? Ask whether there are any helpful assumptions, as well as limiting ones.

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REVIEWING THE ACTIVITY



Step 6:

Once the puzzle is completed, return to the observers. Ask them to identify any specific questions, actions or suggestions that helped to make the 'thinking breakthrough'. Give feedback to those involved in order to clarify specific details in the process that were of value.

Step 7:

Explain to the group how easy it is to make assumptions even when we are aware of the need not to! Ask the participants to take a little time and think about situations in their own lives in which they recognise they may be making assumptions and allowing them to go unchallenged. Share these examples.

Step 8:

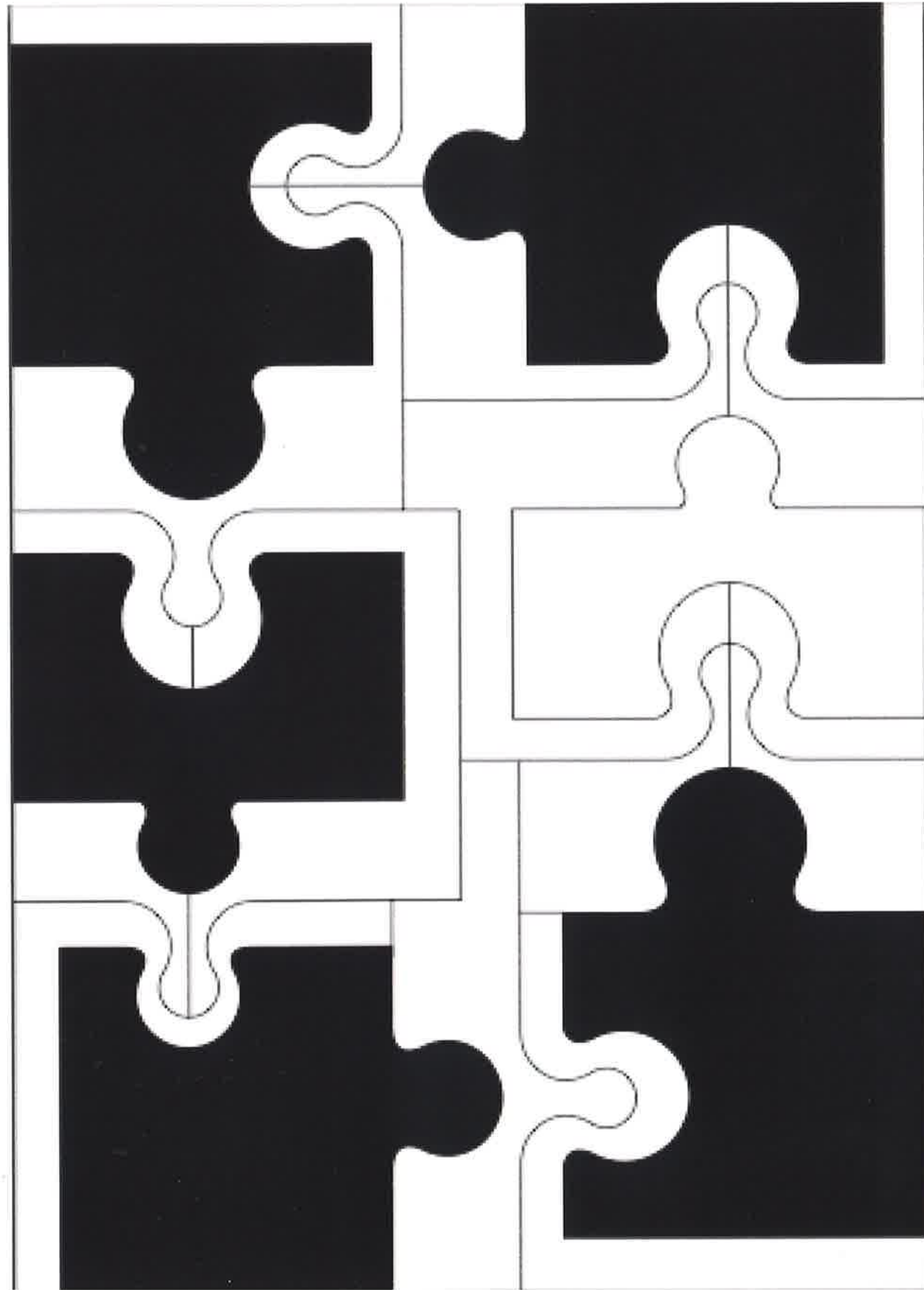
Ask the participants to think about specific ways in which they can apply the learning from the task in their own situations. Ask them to explore strategies for challenging their own thinking and also to consider sensitive and positive ways of doing this in group situations. For example,

"I wonder what would happen if we did this...." is a positive challenge that also offers a potential solution: more effective than criticism!

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