

Technique Tip No. 9: Reaching the Unconscious

Many of us have formed the impression that the unconscious is deep below the surface, invisible, unknowable, out-of-reach - a bit like the huge mass beneath the water in the picture.

This is simply untrue. It is present with us, intruding, dancing in and out of sight every moment of the day (and night!)

It is visible in body language, gestures, tone of voice - as we all know from trying to figure out what others mean/intend towards us. But it is also present in language, all of the time in virtually every sentence or phrase we speak.

The relationship between the conscious and unconscious is much more like that of two voices, a foreground voice (consciousness) and a background (unconscious). This is clearly illustrated in the moebius strip you will find here: [Foreground and Background in communication](#)

So how do we get in touch with it in an active way that engages the group?

You can do this early in a session like a meeting or focus group by speaking about the idea of foreground and background voices – where the background is both the little voice ‘speaking’ in our heads and the significance that we attach to ordinary statements without realising it - while the foreground is what actually gets said.

So let’s say you ask your group members to go around telling each other their names and one fact about themselves. Let’s imagine two responses you might get:

“Hello, my name’s Ian...and I love walking!”

And then:

“Hi, I’m Marie and I’m into fashion, big time!”

These are terribly short and apparently small pieces of information. However, they are much more potentially revealing of unconscious processes than at first meets the eye. This is because before choosing the topic of walking or fashion, Ian & Marie will have momentarily rehearsed a whole set of other things they might have said: e.g. ‘I love home-cooking’, or ‘I have more colds than anyone I know’ and so on. The key point is that they chose the things they did – out of all the things they could have said - in order to present something about themselves that they wanted others to be conscious of. To do this not only have they deleted some things they might say, but they are hoping to evoke certain associations and popular meanings by their choices. However, they may hardly be conscious of what they’re doing themselves, but the group will ‘hear’ both the words and some aspect of the unconscious intention.

So, *to touch or tap the unconscious*, the interesting follow up remark is not: “Tell us what you like about walking/fashion.” BUT: “of all the things you might have said to this group of people, what made you choose walking/fashion?”

Allow that it might not have been a deep reason, or even if it was it may be too early in the session to reveal it, but what you have done by asking this is to bring into the foreground the presence of the background – and show how it shapes and determines what we say in line with our motivations and wishes. It is also possible that Ian & Marie may have chosen this information in order to avoid other, less comfortable, less normal tit-bits. So, after checking in with Ian & Marie with “of all the things etc.” ask the next two group members, “I’d be really interested to hear one of the selections that came up in your mind that you chose not to say to the group.”

Be sure to normalize and praise every piece of information yielded and to enforce safety and acceptance in the group so that no-one is shamed or sneered at, and then go on to ask the next two members: “We’ve gone this far, it’d be interesting to ask you to share one of the things you would have been more reluctant to put out into the group. Are you willing to have a go at that?”

In this way, even in the first 10 minutes of our session we are working with background unconscious material and bringing it to light in an interesting and innocuous fashion. I guarantee that your group will be fascinated by this style of working, and that you have already created permission to delve into the unconscious intentions of the group at any time along the way - providing that you update the group's permission, deal sensitively with the material and keep everyone safe.

If you would like a pdf of this technique, so that you can review and practice it, it is here: