



## **Lumination – a coaching style board game that makes a difference**

***Hazel Russo***

*How the use of a coaching board game can facilitate insights, interaction between players, development of a coaching approach and lasting results.*

**In this piece I will outline how I came to create a coaching style board game called Lumination and share the impact it has had on those who have taken part in it.**

### **How the game was developed and why**

During the late 1990s I was involved in some personal development work through which I created a game. This game involved the participants embarking on a treasure trail in my local woods in which they met characters (a number of my friends and acquaintances dressed in costume) who invited them to take part in an activity. Each player had been invited to bring a question about their life to the game, and each character's activity was designed to stimulate thinking and reflection about these questions. The questions didn't need to be shared but could be.

For me this game was an exciting adventure in creation and play but what I hadn't expected was the impact that it would have on the participants. People engaged with the game so fully, and took on the sense of magic and play in such a light yet powerful way, that some experienced major realisations as a result of taking part. People approached me afterwards in awe at what they had experienced. I felt that something very special had taken place and wondered how it might be developed.

Several years later I decided to develop this idea into a board game and worked with a friend over a number of years to do so.

### **Trials and tribulations**

My key aim was to embody the essence of the original game in a way that worked with a small group. This took many hours of testing questions, testing 'characters' and also – having never created a board game before – testing pace, levels of participation and developing a framework that would work no matter what question a player brought to the table.

At the first ever trial I invited two friends to play. I gave them the instructions, sat back and observed what took place. It wasn't long before the hairs stood up on the back of my neck and I was moved to tears to discover that it worked. Not only did it work but my friends – who had not met each other previously - were engaged in a powerful and profound conversation about their lives.

I tested the game with other groups of friends, family and coaching colleagues and had similar results. I then began to venture out to clients and people I didn't know and in the end tested the game with university careers advisors, occupational psychologists, leadership consultants, coaches, trainers and colleagues at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills during my time there. I received consistently positive feedback and a great deal of encouragement from everyone who played.

I did need to make adjustments, some of them significant, and did so to produce Lumination in its current form.

### How it works

The game itself is suitable for 2 – 6 players and takes the form of a conventional board game, comprising a board, counters, packs of cards, a booklet, a dice and a set of instructions. It can also be used in one-to-one settings and I do also use the cards themselves with individual clients as a way to work with metaphors and creative thinking.



It is generally facilitated – certainly on the first occasion – in a similar way to action learning sets. However, the participants take ownership of the game and the facilitator's role is that of holding the space, looking after timings and providing support on process where necessary or with any challenges which may arise and require assistance. It is the players' game and the players' process and this is something I have learned to respect.

Each player commences the game by identifying a question, challenge or issue they are dealing with. Players then throw the dice and move their counters around the board in turn, much as one would in a conventional board game. The game proper begins when a player's counter lands on a place which guides them to select specific cards. The cards contain instructions and prompts to interact with other players using a coaching approach. The notion of meeting characters is embodied into this process as players move their counters around the board.

The game is non-competitive so there is no rush to the end. Rather it is a shared and supported journey.

Lumination is not – as I discovered late one evening with friends – an after dinner game. It is a coaching style process which touches on some potentially challenging issues and is not to be trifled with – excuse the pun! That said, it is fun and engaging but I do now make clear to people who want to use it that it is not the same as playing Monopoly or Trivial Pursuit.

## Feedback and results

### *Creating containment*

As with any coaching or group intervention the initial contracting is very important. Agreements around confidentiality, respect, listening and being willing to participate are always discussed before the game begins to ensure players are ready and able to take part. However, something which has surprised me from the outset is the degree to which the game seems to give permission for people to share their experiences – both with strangers and with those they know. In most cases people have been willing to open up about challenges they have been facing in their work or personal life in a very real and honest way.

They have also been open to receiving feedback and challenge from other players. In many cases the participants had never experienced coaching, action learning or any kind of personal or professional development before and yet they were sharing and supporting each other in a profound and respectful way.

#### **Meet The Woodcutter – a Lumination Character**

The Woodcutter's theme is Action. He is a grounded character, knowing when to act and when not to and suggests that the way forward is often simple. Here's a question from him: *"If you knew you could only succeed, what would you do next?"*

On one or two occasions, people did say that they would prefer to play with friends and family rather than colleagues but in the majority of cases this has not been an issue. Contracting is clearly important here, as well as managing people's expectations. The feedback that I received from one of the occupational psychologists who trialled the early version, is that Lumination creates containment. The very fact of playing a game with others in this structured and safe space gives people permission to open up, and that has certainly been my experience.

### *Facilitating group interaction*

The game itself is designed to stimulate group interaction. The cards prompt the players to ask each other questions or to offer feedback and suggestions. It is not a purely non-directive approach which is why I call it a coaching style game, but it does ensure that all participants are involved and engaged. In doing so it gently nudges the quieter players to share their thinking and at the same encourages those who are used to speaking out to listen and ask questions. This has proved very effective.

### *Encouraging insights*

The questions embodied into the game are designed to encourage players to think about their situation differently. The random nature of the card selection also encourages this type of right brain, creative thinking.

Many players have come to a realisation about their situation or in fact have discovered that something other than their originally identified challenge is the real issue – much as people do in a coaching session.

### ***Introduction to coaching***

The nature of the questions and approach of the game encourages players to learn about a coaching approach. Indeed rather than give a workshop or talk at the beginning of a coaching contract, myself and a number of colleagues used Lumination as the introduction to coaching so the clients could experience it in a fun and interactive way. This worked extremely well.

It has also potential for use as part of a coach training to consolidate learning; or for trainers to observe students in action as an afternoon or evening activity.

### ***Enhancing coaching practice***

With individual clients the game has introduced a wonderful dimension of creativity into coaching sessions. It has led me to ask questions and pursue avenues which would not necessarily have come up otherwise and this has been refreshing for me as a coach.



Clients have fed back that the visual imagery, combined with the powerful questioning has been impactful, so it is a valuable addition to my coaching toolkit.

### ***Facilitating lasting results***

Lumination mirrors coaching and action learning by encouraging participants to identify next steps. These can be actions or ways of being or thinking and are identified by the player as something they are taking away.

I have received emails from a number of previous participants who took part and for whom the game proved impactful. One training consultant who took part solidified what had been an idea before playing, into deciding to make plans to move out of the UK. This she duly did and sent me a lovely email to let me know.

I have worked with others who have found it a very effective way to support them with making a major decision of some kind or to consolidate their thinking over a particular issue.

### ***Why Lumination?***

It did take me some time to come up with the name and in the end a friend helped me crack it but for me the game is designed to shine a light on any issue and Lumination seemed to capture that somehow.

## How can it be used?

Lumination is an effective tool for small groups or teams. It can also be used as an introduction to coaching or as an activity in coach training programmes. It has been used by careers advisors looking at how to introduce a coaching approach to students, and with clients to support them either individually or in teams. And it is a great activity for a team awayday, provided there is facilitation.

I have a number of coaches who use Lumination and hope that this will grow over time. Below are some of the comments I have received from those who have taken part:

- *Provided a framework to think about things bubbling around in my mind*
- *Has given me new insights and (importantly) steps to move forward*
- *Fascinating characters and insights*
- *Incredible coincidences, making the game a lot more acceptable, and creating an environment of truth and honesty*
- *Fun, illuminating, meaningful*



*Hazel Russo has been coaching professionally for over 15 years and has worked with executive, leaders and professionals from sectors as diverse as energy, finance, health, education, technology and consultancy. She is accredited by the Association for Coaching and facilitates the Association's Central London Co-coaching Forum.*

*Hazel uses Lumination in her coaching and facilitation work and supports those who would like to include it in their portfolio of coaching tools. She can be contacted at [info@hazelrussocoaching.co.uk](mailto:info@hazelrussocoaching.co.uk) or via [www.hazelrussocoaching.co.uk](http://www.hazelrussocoaching.co.uk).*