

Solution Focused Reflecting Teams - Questions of Clarification

Solution Focused Reflecting Teams (SFRTeams) have been applied in a variety of contexts including peer supervision, mutual mentoring, case conferences, as a project and business support tool and as an organisational development tool.

The basic format consists of a set of time-constrained and structured phases in which the person receiving help *prepares* to receive help and presents the issue they want help with. The helping-team then *clarify* what they need to know, then *compliment* (or *affirm*) the case presenter and *reflect* on their understanding and appreciation of the situation. Finally, the case presenter *closes* their section of the meeting by specifying some action they will undertake. (A cycle of *preparing, clarifying, affirming, reflecting and closing phases.*)

Each member of the team, (usually around five members), may take turns to receive the undivided attention of the helping team for about thirty minutes per issue. The structure of SFRTeams creates a supportive team atmosphere very quickly. Fuller descriptions of the core structure of SFRTeams is available in the publications listed below and on www.solutionsology.co.uk

This paper focuses on the Clarification Phase. I have encouraged the use of open questions (questions that invite more of a response than a 'Yes' or 'No' answer) and discouraged the use of closed questions (questions that invite a 'Yes' or 'No' answer) with SFRTeams. This is important because a series of closed questions can, inadvertently, steer the helping-team to adopting a theory or position about the case-presenters situation, which constrains the compliments and reflections offered later. The purpose of the Affirming and Reflecting Phases are to open up possibilities and offer choices to the case-presenter, not to limit the frame of reference of the helping-team and case-presenter. Closed questions that steer in this way are in effect 'covert reflections', because they can introduce new possibilities and limitations into the session too early.

Closed Questions That Steer

Examples of using closed questions to develop a theory, or position, offer covert reflections or steer the inquiry could be:

- 1 Does the client have trouble asserting himself?
- 2 Have you tried visualising yourself succeeding in this area of your life?

Notice that the focus of these questions is on speculating about the case-presenter's client or the case-presenter. Of course, any of this content (assertiveness, visioning etc) is suitable for possible reflections.

Closed Questions That Clarify

I have noticed that skilled Solution-focused practitioners continue to use some closed questioning during the clarifying phase. I have observed they do this primarily to clarify or understand facts about the situation that case-presenter seeks help with.

For example

- (1) Did you say the client never has the problem on a Tuesday?
- (2) Did you say you are more relaxed and creative if you get up early in the morning?

Notice the focus of the questions is on the account the case-presenters has given of the client's words or (where the case-presenter is also the client) on case-presenter's own words.

One common assumption I notice in conversations with colleagues about the SFRTeam model is that only Solution-focused practitioners and trainees use it. This is not true, for some teams and groups an SFRTeam is their first (and maybe only) experience of Solution-focused thinking and practice. Some colleagues are less concerned about the issue of closed questions than I am. One colleague recently insisted that only closed questions should be used in the clarifying stage! However, he was assuming that the Presentation Phase is always long enough for the case-presenter to tell their story and that the skilled helping team would only ask closed questions to clarify facts. Michael Hjerth has experimented with using a Presentation Phase consisting of only one sentence. This variation is helpful where the case-presenter isn't clear about what they want and is also useful testing and building the questioning skill of the helping team.

There are two threads to my thinking about the quality of questioning in the Clarification Phase; 'What kinds of questions work best across different contexts?' and 'What else works?' One effective way I have found to improve the quality of the Clarifying Phase is to firmly remind the helping team that part of their job during the clarification phase is to get ready to compliment the case-presenter in the Affirming Phase, AND tell them there is a rule that each member of the helping team is only allowed to offer ONE COMPLIMENT to the case-presenter. One compliment seems to take a lot more thought than two or three compliments! When a helping team take this idea seriously the pace of the questioning slows down and the quality of the helping team's listening improves.

So what kinds of questions do work across different contexts in which SFRTeams are used? So far it seems to me that there is good reason to be cautious about the use of closed questions especially closed questions that enquire into something that has not thought about or done - because of the likelihood of narrowing possibilities rather than opening them up. It also seems to be a good idea to be cautious about the use of future focused questions when the case-presenter has a client, or is interested in influencing someone, because of the risk of disconnecting the enquiry from factual descriptions of what the case-presenter and client are already doing that could be usefully built on, and inadvertently wandering into interesting but ungrounded fantasies. I realise that these cautions do not answer my own question; 'What kind of questions work across contexts?' Well, beyond encouraging the use of open questions and fact-checking closed questions I am still pondering this matter. The most constructive answer I can give, at this stage is that, in general, the best questions are asked by helping teams who stay mindful that part of their task is for each of them to offer the case-presenter one well-considered compliment based on the questions they ask and the case-presenters answers. Being mindful of a commitment to offer a relevant compliment is part of the process of Solution-focused questioning!

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