

A container for problems

... one with no cracks!

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This activity enables a group of people to move speedily and wholeheartedly from problem talk to solution talk. They have the opportunity to say as much as they need to about the problem. They can then move on to solutions without the problem interfering with their ability to move forward.

Setting

- This usually takes between 20–60 minutes – the participants decide how long they need to do it.
- It is suitable for 2 to 25 people.

Context and purpose

Insoo Kim Berg often said that ‘being solution focused does not mean that you are problem phobic’. In SF, analysing problems is not seen as useful in finding solutions, so an SF facilitator does not enquire into problems that are being expressed. However, in SF it is also recognised that when people bring up problems repeatedly it is often because they have felt prevented from expressing them to the extent that they wish and have not felt heard. So in SF work the facilitator does not avoid problems but shows that they are actively listening to whatever the individual chooses to express, without making enquiries into the problem. The approach respects people’s desire to be heard without becoming problem focused.

This activity is designed to give people permission to talk about the problem as much as they want and ensures that they are heard. It provides a contained space and time in which to express the problem. The effect is that people are ready to focus on solutions earlier and in a practical and productive way. The problem no

longer leaks into the process of solution building. As a side benefit it serves to confirm or re-create a sense of connectedness amongst the group and models an approach in which the group has an opportunity to express the problem but also takes on the responsibility for finding solutions.

The exercise is especially useful with teams struggling emotionally with a difficult situation that they are facing as a group or with an experience that has happened to them, especially if this experience keeps intruding into their attempts to move forward.

It is best used after their hopes and goals for the day have been considered but before the solution building phase of the work.

Detailed description

This activity is worked into a team workshop designed to find ways forward. Before the workshop the facilitator is likely to be aware that there is a problem disturbing the group and preventing them from moving towards solution building. For example this often happens to a group following a major restructure, after heavy financial losses, when a division is placed under close observation or has to hit seemingly unattainable targets. Please note that the facilitator can also introduce it into a workshop on the spur of the moment if he can see that the group is continuously troubled by the problem.

The activity is introduced as part of the agenda for the day so that the group knows that they will have an opportunity to talk about what has happened or is happening to them. It is helpful to say explicitly that you would like to have a session early in the workshop to allow people to express their thoughts and feelings about the problem.

In order to keep the focus on solution building as the main purpose of the day, it is important that the group does an exercise to consider their goals and best hopes before this exercise. This ensures that the main purpose of the day remains evident.

Step 1: Individuals consider what they would like to express to the group

Introduce the activity and say that the first step is for individuals to have an opportunity to think about what they would like to say to the group. If the group has up to 6 people, ask them to spend 5 minutes quietly considering their thoughts and feelings about the

problem and what they would like to say about it. With larger numbers it is best to work in pairs and ask the pairs to spend 15 minutes discussing their thoughts and feelings about the problem together. Participants are welcome to jot down their thoughts.

Step 2: The group shares their thoughts and feelings about the problem

After Step 1, ask the whole group how long they would like to spend sharing their thoughts and feelings and accept the time frame that they suggest. Accepting their time frame is essential to the success of the activity so that individuals do not feel prevented from having adequate time to express themselves.

Ask them to gather together in a circle at one end of the room or in another room if available. This can work well quite informally, with participants deciding whether they will drag a chair along, lean on tables etc.

Go around the group inviting individuals to take turns to express their thoughts and feelings. Use a fairly fluid style, allowing others to add their reflections to somebody's thoughts. As necessary, reflect back what is being said so that individuals know that they are being heard. You can go around a second time if listening to others has sparked further thoughts.

Half way through the allocated time ask the group if that time frame is still OK and adjust it if necessary. At the end, check again that they are ready to leave this activity and move on. My experience is that the group usually needs less time than they have said.

When the group has finished expressing their thoughts it is helpful to take a short break to separate the focus on the past from a focus on the future after the break.

What happens next

When people have left the past behind them through this activity, it is good to move directly into an activity that marks this shift such as the preferred future, the miracle question etc.

Comments

I developed this activity to provide a symbolic way to enact movement from the past to the future, from problem to solution in SF

terms. In SF, problems are seen as part of the past and solutions as part of the future. In this activity, different spaces are used to symbolise the past and the future, with participants choosing to leave the space where they have talked about the past when they are ready and moving into the space where they will talk about the future and build solutions.

There are three keys to this activity. The first is for the facilitator to give permission to the group to talk about the problem by building time into the agenda. Once individuals know that they will be heard, their anxiety to be heard wanes and they no longer continuously search for ways to bring up their feelings about the problem.

The second is to ensure that the group is in control of the time chosen to share these thoughts. In SF, if people talk about the problem as much as they want to and no more than that, then giving the group control over the time ensures that this happens. In practice, once people are not fighting to be heard, the time required for this activity often tends to be less than estimated.

The third is to have a symbolically different space in the room or another room so that the group can physically leave the past behind them after this activity. The problem is fully placed into a container in one space and no longer needs to leak into the other space.

Acknowledgement of sources

This activity offers a way for a group to actualise Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg's perfectly balanced way of understanding and accepting people's needs to express their feelings about a problem without becoming problem focused. People talk about the problem as much as they want, and no more.