Authentic Leadership Associates Ltd
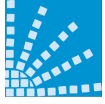
Action Learning Process

1. Story

The Problem Holder takes time to tell the story of their problem. This is largely left to the Problem Holder. Clarity is not a priority at this point.

The work of the Group is to show that they are listening non-judgementally and to build the rapport that will assist the other stages. You might note down points that you think could usefully be clarified or areas that could be expanded on.

It is useful at this stage to notice what your response is. What do you think of and feel as you hear the story? If you note what your immediate response is you can begin to ask, "Is this response going to get in the way of helping the other person?"

Some examples of responses that may be unhelpful are:

Thinking about the details of other things this reminds you of.
Feeling strong emotions about situations this reminds you of.
Wanting to rescue the person.
Making assumptions.
Feeling impatient.

2. Ventilation

If the Problem Holder has not freely expressed his/her feelings about the problem s/he is encouraged to do so.

Some people are slower to recognise and express their feelings. Feelings that are not acknowledged can be a barrier to deeper understanding. For example, we can better deal with fear once we have accepted it is an issue. The work of the group is to ask questions to help the Problem Holder be clear what emotional impact this situation has had.

Some examples of questions that may be helpful are:

And what are you feeling right now?
And what sort of emotions have you been feeling as you have gone through this experience?
And what is the effect on you of living with this issue over time?
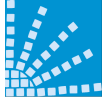
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3. Clarification

Through questioning group members encourage the Problem Holder to define the problem more clearly. The aim is a statement that the Problem Holder feels is a fair description of what s/he experiences as the problem and an outcome. What is it that the Problem Holder wants to be different? Note that the problem statement or the outcome may change during later stages.

If a "nest" of problems emerges, the group helps the Problem Holder to identify where to focus or begin.

The Problem Holder may write a statement, preferably on a flipchart.

This is an example of what a problem statement and outcome might look like.

When I am mentoring I am have a strong sense that the person I am mentoring is not ethical and that as X gains promotion X will deal with people in a way damaging to them and to the company. I feel concerned and guilty that I am assisting X to gain promotion. I want to decide if I will continue the mentoring, and if so, how I can do this in good conscience.

Some examples of questions that may be useful are:

And how would you sum up what has happened?
And how is this a problem for you?
And what do you want to be different?
And which of these issues do you most want to work on today?
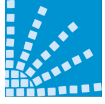
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4. Scoping

The group members ask questions to generate a wider understanding of the problem by the Problem Holder.

The work of the group is to bring out relevant detail and to help the Problem Holder to identify unhelpful distortions or generalisations. In many situations language is effective because it compresses information. The downside, especially when we use language to represent a problem, is that we lose important data.

Group members need to be clear that they are asking a question to assist the Problem Holder, not out of personal interest.

Rapport is very important. Without rapport the questions may be experienced as the "third degree".

Some examples of scoping questions are:

When did you first notice this was an issue?
And then what happened?
What did you notice? What was your response then?
When you say "Every time I work with Y this happens", do you really mean every time? (Some other generalisation words are never, always, constantly, everybody, totally and absolutely.)
Is anyone else is involved in this? What is their involvement?
When you say you feel "x" (e.g. stuck, unsure, apprehensive) what does that mean for you?
When you call this "x" (e.g. a mess, knot, cul-de-sac), what does that mean for you?
How does Z "make you feel angry?
How do you know that when W says "…", it doesn't mean what W says but what you think it means?
What do you think are the implications of doing "x", / not doing anything?
What are your feelings now about "y"? What are the implications of that for future work?
How do (you imagine) other people respond to this (type of) situation? Is your response the same or different? How is your response different? Why is your response different?
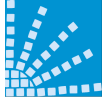
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5. Identifying Positive Elements

When a person labels a situation as a problem it is easy to overlook elements that are positive in a complex situation.

The work of the group is to ask questions to help the Problem Holder identify the resources that are available and any potential for benefits.

Nearly all behaviours are useful somewhere. One approach might be to help the Problem Holder see where an action might be useful in the future.

Some examples of questions that may be useful are:

And what have you learned from this problem so far?
And what have you learned about yourself in all this?
And where could you use "x" in the future?
And when you did "y", what was your positive intention?
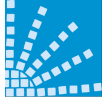
6. Identifying Alternative Courses of Action

The work of the group is to ask questions to help the Problem Holder become aware of the full range of choices available.

If the Problem Holder wishes, these could be summarised on a flipchart.

Some examples of questions that may be useful are:

So what are the options you have now?
Is there anything that could add to your range of options?
Which of these options are exclusive?
Which of these options might be used together?
Which of these options are you able to initiate now if you choose?
Which of these options need he support of others before you can proceed?
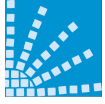
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7. Intermediate Goals

The work of the group is to help the Problem Holder decide what his/her next step, however small, is going to be.

This may be to work on the problem in another way, for example, by discussing with another person. Or it may be to take action. Target times should be established.

8. Final Check

Where is the Problem Holder now compared to the start of the process?

Some examples of questions that may be useful are:

How do you feel now?
Is anything else you need to bring this space to a satisfactory close?