

The Solution-Focused Reflecting Management Team

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A management team of a department in a large organization was recently formed. In the team are some managers with limited management experience and some with more experience. The organization has formulated a clear vision and there are specific performance goals, both for organizations and departments. The atmosphere in the management team is positive and open. As the team was only recently formed, the members don't know each other well. So, naturally, they have not developed a shared frame of reference and robust working relationships.

The leader of the management team takes the initiative to organize a few sessions to invest in the development of the team. He wants to use these sessions to share specific interesting, challenging or problematic situations that the team members face and to reflect on them. For this purpose a structured team technique is used called 'The Solution-focused Reflecting Team' (Norman e.a, 2003)¹.

The Solution-focused Reflecting Team technique

Each time you run this technique one of the team members brings in a case and the other team members are in the helping role. One of the team members (or an external consultant) facilitates the process. The technique works best when its rules are followed closely, and when every member of the team has had experience as a casepresenter and as a supporting team member. Allowing half an hour per casepresenter usually works well.

1. Preparing

All team members take a few minutes to think about which case they might bring in. Then the first team member is asked to present his case. Some teams take time out for each caseholder to prepare in writing – no more than a couple of hundred words are allowed!

2. Presenting

This person (the casepresenter) describes the situation and specifies what it is he wants help with. The other team members listen without interruption until the casepresenter has finished.

3. Clarifying

The team members each take a turn to ask questions, and then remain silent until their turn comes around again. Questions for clarification are encouraged (what, where, when, who and how questions). Why questions are discouraged. (Will people want to know why 'why' questions are discouraged?) Team members are encouraged to think carefully about their questions, as their job is to understand the facts of situation from the casepresenters point of view and understand what the casepresenter is already doing that supports progress – any progress!

4. Affirming

The team members tell the casepresenter briefly what impresses each of them most about him, or her, in the situation they have described. The customer remains silent (except perhaps for a thank you!).

5. Reflecting

Each team member says one thing at a time or 'passes'. Sometimes team members offer reflections triggered by previous reflections. The team continues until everyone has said all they want to say, or time runs out. The input that is offered contains everything that team members consider relevant – for instance technical input, advice, reflections, metaphors, or even rhetorical questions (for later consideration). The case presenter remains silent and can only briefly speak to point out any persistent misunderstandings.

6. Closing

The casepresenter responds briefly to what was said in the reflecting phase, usually stating what seems most applicable and specifies some course of action.

What advantages does this technique have?

The management team applied this technique several times in several sessions. Cases presented involved dealing with difficult employees, how to delegate, how to manage older and highly experienced team members, how improve co-operation between project managers and employees from another department, and so on. We evaluated the effects of this approach to team reflection specifically. From this evaluation we learned that all team members found the approach highly useful. Some literal quotes on the value of the technique were:

"In the our hectic everyday life we usually don't find the opportunity to discuss these kinds of topics"

"I got some very useful feedback and suggestions about my case that I could apply really well."

"It is useful to find out about each other - that all of us are struggling with some issues."

"It helps to see that you are not the only one with a problem."

"It gives you the feeling that you're not alone in this".

"The approach provides calmness."

"It is practical."

"By talking through practical situations we develop a common view on leadership. This is very important for the unity we want as a management team."

"Through this exercise we experienced how well we can help each other."

"By thinking about someone else's problem you solve your own problem too ..and it doesn't even have to involve the same problem!"

"By doing this exercise we become more aware that we're one team."

"Just as well as it's useful to present a case, it is useful to think about someone else's case."

Conclusion

The knife cuts more than one way with this technique. Individual case presenters are helped in a very practical way and an atmosphere of openness and collaboration automatically emerges. From the mass of ideas and perspectives gained, everyone becomes more aware of the intelligence, wisdom and experience the team already contains. By talking about several situations and problems in this manner a common frame of reference is bound to develop. Furthermore the team members become much more involved with each other, this contributes to the development of one-on-one relations and of the team as a whole.

This approach works very well with business support groups, project development and support, team-learning and support, skill sharing. We invite you to try it!

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