

SOLUTION FOCUSED GROUP PROCESS

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The Problem with Problem Focused Groups

I have visited groups in North Hokianga, Westland and East Cape looking at economic development. I noted that the groups in these regions felt obliged to tell us all their problems and we felt obliged to listen to them. As we listened, individuals outdid each other in war stories about how difficult it was to do business in their region. They felt the need to reinforce to us that theirs was an acute region and their statistics were amongst New Zealand's worst. Their stories highlighted how other people had let them down – the banks didn't want to lend them money, big companies had pulled out, government hadn't upgraded the roads, and so on. In effect they were abandoned in a hopeless situation, and felt helpless to extricate themselves.

Frequently people said, "the government should", "we are not consulted", "they let us down" and "you need to understand" As the war stories continued the group focused on their long standing problems and members identified themselves as victims. They wallowed in their woes, seeking our tender appreciation of their situation. From this helpless position the future seemed overwhelming and only other people and agencies could solve their problems.

For many years therapists working with groups of victims believed the road to recovery was to listen intently and encourage their clients to turn over old rocks and understand why they were victims. Then the therapist would provide the rational answer for their recovery. These programmes largely failed. Why? They encouraged victims to focus their energies and efforts on their problems, not their solutions.

I believe that many well meaning government agencies have used group processes that have encouraged people in acute regions to think and act like victims.

Solution Focused Group Processes

A solution focused approach enables people to focus their energies on finding the answers. It enables people to believe they have a reservoir of qualities and opportunities to overcome obstacles.

This was evident in a meeting we held in Ruatoria. Bruised from an earlier meeting of angry, helpless business people, I determined that this meeting would be different. We asked what people were doing. One member talked about his forestry work trust. He apologised that it was not a real business with the sole intention of maximising profits. As we urged him on he described how they had grown in 14 years, employing 300 people from jail, gangs and dysfunctional lives. They had a 90% success rate in seeing their workers through to stable, permanent jobs. I observed that this was a world class organisation with results rarely achieved anywhere on the planet.

The meeting energised. People started to talk excitedly about their achievements and possibilities. They talked about what actions they could take to build a vibrant local economy and strong society. As the meeting came to a close a member of the group stood up and gave a powerful speech. He said this was the best meeting he

had ever been to. He felt excited by the possibilities and knew the group could make great progress. He said he would like to invite us back to help them achieve their potential. The group nodded agreement. Within a week of that meeting, members of the group have initiated several positive steps.

Principles of a Solution Focused Group Process

I have attempted to rework the principles described by Metcalf (1998) to apply to interactions with communities in priority regional economic development areas.

1. Define problems so they open up possibilities

When communities describe themselves with labels like 'acute region' it reinforces their beliefs about themselves and keeps them stuck in old actions. I also observed the burden community members carried from the repetition of negative statistics. This was especially true for statistics about Maori health, employment and crime levels. Like a tar baby, the more the communities struggled with these statistics, the more hold the statistics took.

It can be helpful to redescribe the problems with language that opens up possibilities without diminishing the difficulties faced. For example a region can be described as having untapped potential. The statistics can be described as challenges.

It helps to deal with specific issues and opportunities. Warm, fuzzy relationships that talk about partnership do little to make a difference. Instead they can be used as a standard against which disappointment in the results can be measured. We frequently heard complaints in Tairāwhiti that government departments came, met, heard the problems, talked about partnership, left but little changed – except the level of cynicism and feeling of hopelessness.

2. Focus on exceptions to the problem

In Gisborne each group we visited told us other groups were impossible to work with and failed to consult them. There were clearly some very real problems. Instead of focusing on the failed relationship, though, we would have been better to focus on when the relationship had worked better and what was it about these exceptional occasions that had made the difference. This opens a strategy for improving the situation based on the competencies that had already been demonstrated and successful. If groups are focused on their problems, then a question to be posed is, "When has the situation been better?" "What did you do that made it better?" "How can these successful strategies be applied now?"

3. When you notice a competency in the group, comment on it and gather group members' thoughts on this competency.

In Ruatoria we commented on exceptional quality artwork, a gritty determination to succeed against the odds, and a world class work trust programme. People responded with surprise that we valued their efforts, followed by pride in their accomplishments and belief in their future.

4. Avoid seeking insight into the groups' problems, instead focus on their abilities to survive and overcome these problems.

Wallowing in problems and defending their origins does little to overcome them. It certainly doesn't support their belief systems and generate the energy to succeed

over adversity. It doesn't help Westland to analyse that their region is depressed because they are remote and the goldrush finished over a century ago. It does help them to know that the goldrush gave them a unique history and their isolation a unique environment to attract tourists.

5. Visualise a better future

Trampers will know the feeling as you stand at the bottom of a mountain looking up at the challenge how daunting it can be. The mountain looks high, the pack feels heavy, and the route uncertain. By contrast there is an exhilarating feeling standing at the top of the mountain looking down. The pack feels light, the route obvious, the mistakes in finding the route up the mountain evident but solved. That feeling of exhilaration can be experienced at the bottom of the mountain by imagining yourself at your goal and looking back.

The same strategy applies to overcoming problems. Ask a group what it would look like when they have succeeded. Then ask them to look back to see how they got there. This strategy is called the miracle question. When I am feeling brave and the group or individual seems receptive I try the full version of this question. If I had the courage to try this in Ruatoria (I didn't!) it would go something like this " Shut your eyes. Imagine yourself going to bed tonight. You do all your normal things – brush your teeth, get into your pyjamas and so on. But when you are asleep a miracle occurs. You wake up and your dreams for East Cape have come true. The area is prosperous. People are in jobs. Crime and drug use is low. Maori culture is strong and valued. Your mountain is sacred and safe. Ngati Porou people come home to be part of this vibrant area. You see yourself welcoming them with pride in your accomplishments. You hear the powhiri and the comments as speaker after speaker describe their joy in coming home. There is a celebratory hangi. Even the Prime Minister has come to toast the region and the gritty determination of the people around this table who have made East Cape such a success. Can you see this? [Pause] Now I would like you to look back to this day in Ruatoria and see the path that got you to this success. Can you see the path? [Pause] Open your eyes."

Every time I have had the courage to try this, I see people's shoulders drop, their problems disappear replaced with a quiet confidence. They always express astonishment at how easy it all seems and how obvious the path ahead is.

However the process can be less overt. Simply add comments to the conversation that paints the desired picture and put people in it.

In time, seeing the potential of people and ideas and sharing these thoughts can become a welcome habit.