

How Come Your Colleagues Haven't Killed You Yet?

Report on a recollection of a conversation

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'The most important ingredient of self-discipline is not to impose your own agenda on the client.'

Insoo Kim Berg

Introduction.

Sometimes people with questions about their situations decide to discuss them with a professional. Their best hope is to find useful answers to their own questions with the help of an outsider. So they engage in conversations that are usually called therapy, counseling, coaching, etc.

The story.

This is what happened to me on a dead-end street in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at around 4 PM on 11 November 2017:

Wandering around this very picturesque city without a map or any other means of orientation (as usual), I entered a street in a poor neighborhood only to find that it had no second exit. A half-naked man rushed out of his house into the street, shouting at me and waving his hands; it was quite frightening, I have to confess. I told him I was lost after walking around, and asked for his help to get out of this place. He realized I was a foreigner, and asked me where I came from. At the mention of Bulgaria, all of a sudden he started smiling and then, much calmer, said 'Yes, Sunny Beach and Golden Sands on the Black Sea coast; I was there several times when I was serving as a soldier in Germany, and I had an affair with a very nice girl there.' So he shared some pleasant memories of his travels to my country, and then he asked me what I was doing in Santa Fe. When I told him I was a psychiatrist attending the annual SFBTA conference there, he became a bit tense and angry again, and told me he had been diagnosed with a number of psychiatric conditions over the years after he left the army, such as Personality Disorder, PTSD, Bipolar Disorder, Schizoid-Affective Disorder, etc., and had been prescribed many kinds of psycho-active drugs... Then he became curious about what I was presenting there, so far from home, and I told him about the QUQu (the Questioning for Useful Questions).

He was very interested in the MAQ (the Mind-Activating Question) - 'What do you think is the most useful question we have to discuss right now?' - and his immediate first comment was 'I have never been asked this question, even though I have seen so many shrinks and psychologists!', and I told him he could use this question himself without any professionals around, at any time he felt he needed to do something about his situation.

We chatted for a few minutes, and when we were about to part, he said: 'Wait a moment!' and entered his house. After a minute or so he came out again, holding a notebook and a pen in his hands, and asked: 'What exactly was the question I have to ask myself in hard times?' and he

carefully wrote it down: ‘What do I think is the most useful question I can ask myself right now?’... and then, looking at it and thinking a bit, he added: ‘How come your colleagues haven’t killed you yet?’

Discussion.

It has always seemed obvious to me that people come to us (supportive professionals) with their questions, and that our job is simply to find together with them the most useful answers to these questions.

Each and every question *of ours* can only interfere with the solution-finding process, slowing it down, as each and every ‘professional’ question may happen to be remote from the client’s agenda, and usually out of the client’s timeline, while the clients’ own questions are obviously always on time, and are stated in the client’s own language, thus paving the Highway to Solutions!

In the words of Nigel Middlemiss, the editor of this text and my teacher in the secondary school, ‘I feel unqualified to comment on the content in any profound way, although it seems to make sense to start with the individual's own inquiry rather than impose external processes on them’ (personal communication via e-mail, 28 April 2023).

Some 20 years of practicing this have proven that it takes a maximum of three turns of the conversational wheel ‘client’s question-client/therapist’s common answer” for us to arrive at a useful and viable solution.

Replacing a client’s question with a professional one should be done only when clients are unable or unwilling to ask something, or when they explicitly demand a question from the professional.

Quite obvious, isn’t it? And yet obviously not so obvious! A bit similar to the Emperor’s New Clothes.

The idea that clients come for professional help with their own questions, and consequently that the helpers should deal primarily with these questions (refraining from the use of any professional instruments) is obvious to the clients, but often hard to bear for the professionals. So, in professional circles, it is one of those ideas that can be rejected, laughed at, or misused, but almost never understood.

Conclusion.

The time for dealing with our clients as *people with questions searching for answers*, has yet to come. Hopefully sooner rather than later, it will inevitably arrive, someday, and the practice of therapy/counseling/coaching etc. will change much for the better.

Reference

Andersen, Hans Christian. The Emperor’s New Clothes,
https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html retrieved from the Internet on 26 April 2023