

One way you can overcome the “I don’t know” response

– John Brooker

Introduction

Recently I was running a training course on Solution Focus Mentoring with a group consisting mainly of police officers. I asked one of them what his best hope was for mentoring, and he told me. I next asked him what he would notice was different about his mentee if he achieved that hope. He thought and said, “I don’t know”. Do you recognise that answer?

People new to Solution Focus often find it tricky to respond to this answer. “What question should I ask?” they query. “Is there a list of questions I can remember?” Yes, there are¹; and when you prepare for an event, you might use them as a prompt to prepare questions. However, as someone who constantly forgets where he put his wallet or keys, I struggle to think how I would remember them ‘in the moment’. There are two other factors too.

Listen carefully

With experience, I have learned that the best way to generate questions to ask teams and individuals within those teams is to **listen** very carefully to what they are saying.

At some point, a relevant question surfaces in my mind, often at the last second, because if I have listened well, it is almost guaranteed to follow what they have just said or said a little earlier. If I try to recall a question, it distracts me from listening, leading to sub-optimal questions.

Give them space to think

Also, when you listen carefully, you can establish if your question has “landed”. Sometimes people will answer quickly; other times, there may be a long pause. Do not rush to ask another question; give them space to think. It might be that they can’t answer it; alternatively, your question may be so great, they need different thinking to answer it.

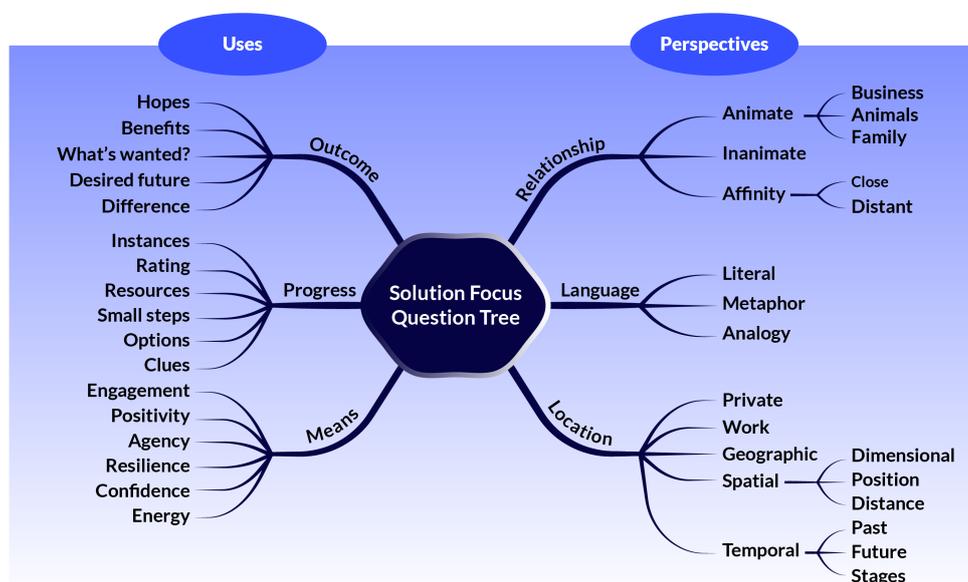
Even when you listen carefully and give them the space to think, you will still sometimes receive the “I don’t know” response, as I did. So what did I do? I changed the perspective. I asked, “OK, what might the mentees mother or favourite person notice is different about them.” He was then able to answer. Not instantly, but with some thought.

And how did I know to change the perspective? Read on.

¹ E.g. ‘1001 solution focused questions’ by Fredrika Bannink. My book ‘Jump Now’ also has many questions you might ask. Both available on Amazon.

The Solution Focus Question Tree

In response to hearing people ask for lists of Solution Focus Questions, I pondered how we might help new and possibly experienced SF practitioners create questions quickly. The result was this, the **SF Question Tree**, which you can use as an aide-memoire to prompt questions.



It is helpful as it makes you aware of some **uses** to which experienced practitioners put questions and the different **perspectives** from which they might ask them. I now only have to recall two words, “Uses” and “Perspectives”, to enable me to generate questions in the moment.

The Branches - Example Questions

On the branches to the left of the trunk are some of the **uses** for which you can use SF questions (it is not exhaustive). You can create helpful patterns of questions based on these uses.

On the branches to the right are questions to help change **perspective** and encourage new insights (again, not an exhaustive list).

For each question, you have a **use**, e.g. to have the police officer think what **benefits** the mentee might obtain from the mentoring; and you ask the question from different **perspectives** (e.g. I used a parent (**Family**) or favourite person (**Affinity – Close**))

In the following questions, the words in bold relate to the Uses and Perspectives branches and sub-branches on the tree. As you read through, I suggest you look to match the bold words in

the sentences to the word category in the tree; this can improve your understanding. E.g. In “What would your **cat** tell you is **better**?”:

‘**Cat**’ aligns to Perspective. The relevant branches are Relationship – Animate – Animals.

‘**Better**’ aligns to Use. The relevant branches are Outcome – Benefits.

Outcomes

As a leader, you use questions to encourage teams to look forward, beyond the current issues they face, to a better future than what they currently see.

Examples

- “What’s **your** best **hope** for this programme?” (e.g. “Increase the number of patients seen.”)
 - “What **benefits** will that bring to the **patients**? To the programme team? To the organisation?”
 - “What would **doctors** notice is **different** in their treatment?”
 - “What would your **cat**² tell you is **better**?”
- “**Imagine** the programme has been hugely successful; you have achieved your **desired future**.”
 - “What do **senior leaders** notice is **different** when they walk through the door on Day 1 after the programme launch?”
 - “What are the **key suppliers** doing **differently**? What else?”
 - “What have the **medical staff** noticed about the **product**? What else?”

Progress

As a leader, you also encourage teams to focus away from obstacles to progress and focus on what can help them make progress.

Examples

- “Move **forward to six months** after the launch, and the product has been successful. **Now look back at those six months**.”
 - “What did the **team** do that makes **suppliers** very pleased?”
 - “How did the **patients** react?”
 - “What would the **media** say about your **progress**?”

² It may seem a ridiculous question to use an animal to evoke a response. It does work, though only if they have told you they have a cat! As well, asking from the perspective of an inanimate object, e.g. “What would the ball notice is different?” may well work with a football or rugby player as there is a close affinity with it.

- *“Imagine the future you have described is “10” on a scale of ‘1’ – ‘10’, where ‘10’ is best. At what number would you **rate** the programme team’s progress so far?” [E.g. “Six”]*
 - *“What is **happening** that moves **you** up to six on the scale already? What else?”*
 - *“Where might your **patients rate** you? Six as well?”*
 - *“What might move **them** to seven on the scale?”*
 - *“What **option** attracts you to make progress? What would be better for **the medical teams** if you took that option?”*
- *“You say that there is not enough budget to do this work.”*
 - *“Where have you seen **other organisations** achieve this on little **or no money**? How **did they do this**?” “How might **we** replicate their achievement **here**?”*
 - *“Where have you faced a budget situation like this before? What **did you do then** to get through?”*

Means

As a leader, you encourage people in teams to surface capabilities and resources within themselves and others that might provide the *means* to make progress.

Examples

- *“Our survey results show that our scientists here are 20% less engaged overall than our **European operation**. Which **areas** are **more engaged** than the average? What is that leader doing **differently**?”*
- *“We have a freeze on headcount, and you are one technician short.”*
 - *“How do you keep the team **so positive**?”*
 - *“What might **the team** do **within its control** that will enable you to make progress with the resources you have?”*
- *“The team has suffered from losing three experienced people.”*
 - *“How have **you coped** with that?”*
 - *“What **clues** would tell **senior leaders** that this team is **resilient**, despite the current situation?”*
 - *“In what **other parts of the organisation** have you seen them cope with this situation? What might give you the **confidence** you can do that?”*
- *“What gives **you** the **energy** to **continue** your work despite the downturn in the economy?”*
- *“Imagine a reconnaissance **pilot** is **flying** over this building right now with x-ray cameras. What **clues** to **progress** might **she detect**?”*

To conclude

I trust you notice in the questions that:

- There is a use for each question
- You can lead people to broaden and deepen their thinking by asking questions from different perspectives.
- You can be creative in your questioning. Creative questions can stimulate more radical thinking.
- View the tree as a stimulus, not a guideline.

Remember, you have been asking questions all your life. When you receive an “I don’t know” response, relax, consider Uses and Perspectives and enjoy being creative in your questioning.