The SF Facilitator's Team Focus Question Tree

By John Brooker

Introduction

Often on SF courses, participants request a list of Solution Focus questions. This seems to be a desire of many new SF practitioners, to help them generate questions when needed.

As someone who is forever trying to recall where he put his wallet, glasses, etc, I struggle to think how a list of SF questions would be useful to me, as I would never remember them.

## Listening generates the best questions

You may ask, "*How have you recalled questions up to now*?" 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 will surface in my mind, often at the last second. Relevant because if I have listened well, it is almost guaranteed to follow what they have just said. If I try to recall a question, I listen poorly, which can lead to sub optimal questions.

In addition, when you listen to the answer generated by your question, 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 may be they can't answer it, alternatively it may be such a great question that they need to think differently to answer it.

Listening aside, the request for questions set me thinking; "*What if we could group SF questions into a few categories, would that help new practitioners gain confidence*?" That led me to create the following "Facilitator's Team Focus Question Tree". I call it "Team Focus Question Tree".

How might this be used?

This Question Tree does not replace listening; rather, it acts as an aid. My best hope is that it helps a team facilitator new to SF to generate questions, with the seven main categories acting as prompts.
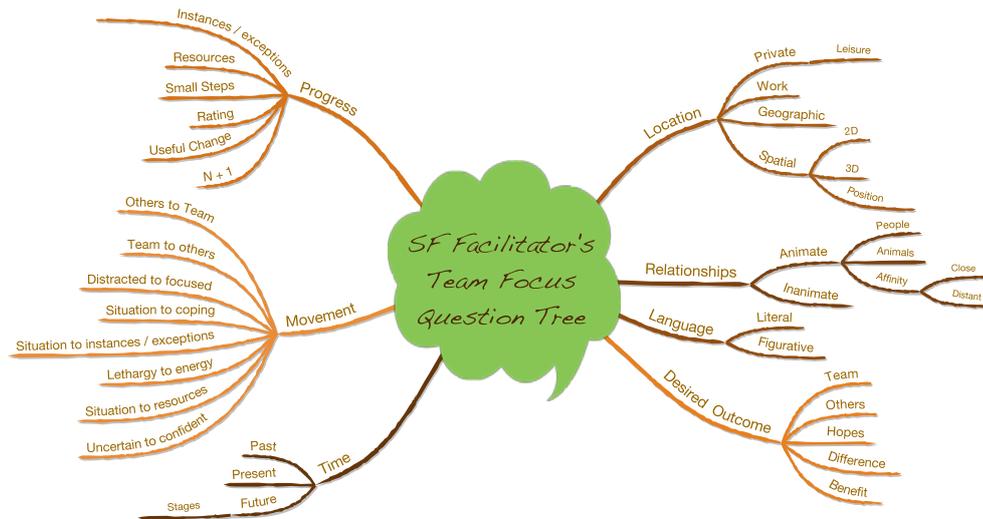
In my wishful future, I notice that people have this to hand, both when designing workshops or other interventions. I see it displayed on the front of a folder during a workshop for a brief peek, to spark further creative questions. As well in my wishful future, users have substituted words of their own and translated the content into their own language.

A few points

Imagine you are looking down at a tree from above with the main branches (or if you prefer, roots) growing out from the tree and sub branches from there. It is quite self-explanatory, I won't discuss all points, just those that might puzzle you.

- **Movement:** The purpose is to move the focus of people away from the less constructive on to more constructive thinking

- **Time / Stages:** Represents different points in the future. It might be at the time when, for example the project is successfully completed; when the project is performing well and on course for success; in three months' time when it is back on track. [With thanks to Mark McKergow for his original thinking on that.]

- **Spatial / 2D and 3D:** Encourages you to think of asking people to notice from different positions, e.g. helicopter or bird's eye view, from different points on the compass etc.

- **Relationships / Inanimate**: If a team draws or refers to an inanimate object, e.g. a mountain, you might ask what the mountain would notice about the situation. Similarly, with non-human animate objects.

- **Progress / instances and exceptions / resources**: My rationale for including in Progress as well as Movement is that by asking about these, one can help the

team make progress. "Instances" is used by a number of practitioners as an alternative to "exceptions".

To understand the Tree better, spend ten minutes developing questions based on it.

Questions for you – please feedback to John if you wish

- Would the Question Tree be helpful to people?
- Do the categories (branches) and sub categories (sub branches) work for you?
- What might alternative / additional words be that would help new SF facilitators?
- How might you notice it being used?

In conclusion

The best aid to asking good Solution Focused questions is listening. Putting together this Question Tree has been very helpful, encouraging me to think about the questions we ask and the reason for asking these questions. You might like to put in your own words or translate it into your own language.

I do not intend that it is exhaustive, nor that people learn every sub branch rote. Rather, regular reviews should reinforce the main categories and improve the breadth and creativity of your questioning. And for those with poor memory, like myself, I hope it will be a relief to know you do not have to learn hundreds of questions.

About the author:

John Brooker is a professional meeting facilitator, encouraging teams internationally to collaborate to create growth. He has run "Yes! And" since 2001 and has used Solution Focus since 2004. He is President of SFiO, an editor of the InterAction Journal. In his spare time he tries to be Solution focused about his favourite football team, Fulham, and is bossed regularly by the family's ginger cat, Morse.

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