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Fifty-one reasons to run away

Some twenty or so years ago I was teaching solution focused practice at a residential school for young people with learning difficulties. It was a four day course and by day one it became apparent that there were problems in the school. I wasn't overly concerned; solution focused training tends to create a collegiate atmosphere so I assumed that the rifts between various members of staff would diminish as the days went by. Nothing was said openly about the problem and everyone was friendly towards me so, in true solution focused style I made no mention of it myself. But it became increasingly palpable. Gradually, I learned that the school had recently undergone significant changes. For many years it had been dominated by a 'craft' culture: students were taught gardening, woodwork and simple construction skills with little attention paid to academic learning. The new Principal had switched the emphasis to more academic skills: reading, writing and arithmetic, and brought with him a new group of classroom teachers. This was the first big rift, between classroom and workshop; the craft teachers seeing the classroom as irrelevant and the academics seeing the workshops as archaic. Matters were complicated by a third group, the residential staff, who looked after the children when they weren't at school. As the least qualified of the staff they were taken less seriously by both teaching groups even though they knew far more about the children and their needs than the others.

One of the advantages of teaching something entirely new to a group with mixed experience and qualification is that it creates a level playing field, in fact, the less formally qualified participants might even be at an advantage since they have less to 'unlearn' and often recognise elements of solution focused practice already in their ways of working. The residential and craft staff were quick to recognise the value of a solution focused framework for their conversations with students. Both groups, and especially the residential staff, had more opportunities for informal conversations and to begin with they were quicker to grasp the basic techniques. Not to be outdone, the academic staff also engaged;

unfortunately, apart from the inevitable exceptions, the groups did not engage with each other nor in the way they expressed their interest. The academic staff tended to ask questions about theory, the craft teachers mostly referred to ways they were already using these ideas (but without a name for them) and the residential staff asked about the children and how solution focused working would apply in particular cases.

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Three-and-a-quarter days went by with the divisions still intact. During that time I agonised. Should I say something about what I was seeing? The solution focused line would be to ignore problems not raised by the client but just carry on with the job in hand. However, many of the staff were beginning to hint, during coffee breaks and lunch,

that things were amiss and several privately asked if I had noticed any tensions. Yet no-one was explicit and no-one raised the issue publicly. I did take some comfort in no longer being a systemic practitioner. The last workshop I ran prior to my total immersion in solution focused practice was on ‘systemic hypothesising as a guide to effective intervention’. The material before me would have been enough for a doctoral thesis though one with a high chance of failure. Nonetheless, I was tempted. It is always a challenge to remain firmly placed in the solution focused philosophy when faced with escalating complexity and at times my self-discipline was challenged. Luckily I managed to stay true. I reminded myself that the commission was to teach participants how to construct solution focused conversations with students, parents and each other. I also kept reminding myself to trust the process.

Then came the morning coffee break on the final day of the course. I was beginning to feel the first welcome ripples of relief; everyone was still present and engaged in the exercises and all the signs were that as a course in solution focused practice it was a good enough success. That is,

until the Principal sat down with me and asked if I had noticed any tensions in the staff group. Admitting that I had indeed experienced some tension, the Principal responded with an expectant stare. “*You’d like me to do something about it?*” I asked. “*Yes, please!*” he said and took his coffee to another table leaving me with ten minutes to form a plan. This was in the days when solution focused ideas belonged almost exclusively to the world of therapy and though, in theory, they had wider applications the theory had not been translated into practice.

I began to run through possible structures in my head:

Small groups working on their hopes for the future of the school, signs of this future beginning to happen and a scale to identify what was already in place. But they had been working in small groups with this framework for much of the course and my attempts to mix the groups up had met with little success.

Maybe something in groups of three with a representative from each ‘side’ but this would draw attention to the rifts and so might exacerbate them.

Maybe recognise the divisions but in a positive light and have them in their own groups working on lists of what their group contributes to the children and the school as a whole. But would this reinforce the divisions.

With a minute to go and no clear plan, I said to myself: pretend it’s a therapy session where everything happens ‘on the hoof’ and planning leads to disaster. I sat down at the front of the hall and waited for inspiration. None came – until I remembered how I try to begin a therapy session: by thinking of the client’s hopes and resources and by looking forward to seeing the client. And then I had my plan. My most used phrase when teaching is “*Get into groups of...*” and still apprehensive about the hour and fifteen minutes, I began with a weak joke, “*Get into groups of fifty-one!*” The confused faces told me that this was a time to be serious so I asked them to form a single group sitting round the hall. When everyone had jostled themselves into position I began with a short speech about my experience of the groups so far. Being a solution focused speech it was very selective but each selection was backed by clear evidence: I was

speaking the truth, if not the whole truth. I commented on their level of commitment, citing various conversations; I commented on the obvious care lavished on all parts of the school – well equipped and organised workshops, exciting classroom displays, individuality within the children’s living space and everyone’s hard work on the course. With this preamble and a request to speak to everyone I turned to the person on my left and asked “*What do you value about working in this school?*” The answer seemed an impossibly long time coming and when it did come my heart sank. “*I can walk to work*”. Don’t worry, I reassured myself, there are fifty more to go.

By the eighth response a great hole in the ground had opened up at my feet and had I not been transfixed to my chair I would gladly have jumped into it. I looked around the group and saw only stony faces disappearing into the distance yet I knew it was too late to go back. In the middle of this awful moment I remembered that fifty-one is divided by seventeen and with the remnants of my resolve I made that my target and trudged on. People worked at the school because the pay was better than they could get elsewhere, they were too old to get another job, they liked children, they had been transferred from another school. Not a single positive remark about the school itself – except the eleventh person: she said the school had long had a reputation for being pioneers in teaching children with learning difficulties and what might seem ‘old hat’ now was cutting edge not so long ago. She thought the current upheavals were entirely normal but they were a great bunch of people and would work it out in the end. “*At last!*” I thought, now people will begin to speak more meaningfully. But they didn’t and with nowhere else to go I plodded through seventeen, thirty-four and onwards towards fifty-one. In the end maybe one-in-five responded with a degree of enthusiasm and I felt as bad as I had ever felt in my professional life. The last person answered just as the clock struck one and having called out, “*Time for lunch!*” I fled the building. It was winter and in my blind rush I had left my coat behind. Freezing cold, I walked the streets around the school hardly knowing which were tears of shame and humiliation and which were caused by the wind. I even though fleetingly of not going back. Eventually I plucked up my courage and decided to carry on the course as if the disastrous exercise had not happened. My hopes of slipping in unobserved were dashed when I came through the door and found the

Principal anxiously waiting for me. As he opened his mouth to speak I felt the decades slide away leaving me in the familiar role of the naughty but misunderstood schoolboy awaiting a punishment which was both deserved and unfair.

What he then said was totally unexpected. He would never have believed it was possible to make such a dramatic intervention; if anything was needed to convince him of the value of a solution focused approach that was definitely it. Everyone had been buzzing during lunch with

people who never spoke to each other speaking about how they were going to collaborate on making solution focus work. In his words it had totally transformed the school. Certainly the closing exercises had an extra energy about them, the groups were more mixed and at the break several people thanked me for the big exercise, saying how good it was to hear everyone being positive about the school.

I have done this exercise with many staff groups since and each time I have experienced a crisis of confidence somewhere along the way. Somehow, the simplicity of solution focused practice is still beyond belief and we have to keep reminding ourselves to accept the awkwardness of going against reason, against the obvious need to match complexity with even more complexity and simply to trust the process.

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