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Information Seeking Interventions

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There are a number of specific interventions, or verbal operations, that you can make that will increase the quality and quantity of the information you obtain. The following was stimulated initially by the list of operations suggested by Eric Berne (in his book *Principles of Group Treatment* Grove Press 1966 pp 233-247 – where he has interrogation, specification, confrontation, explanation, illustration, confirmation, interpretation, crystallisation).

Interrogation

Note that this refers to the process of asking questions to find out information, opinions, etc. – it does not mean interrogation as if of a prisoner! Your skill in interrogation is crucial – ask the wrong questions, or vague questions, and you may receive misleading information. Question types, such as open, closed, etc., and sequences such as starting with open to get them talking and shifting to closed to finalise details, will be relevant here.

For example, you might ask “*What has happened on the XYZ project?*” if you want to get a general overview. However, if you were specifically interested in the project spending, you would need to ask a more specific question, such as “*How much has already been spent?*”

Specification

Specification refers to classifying and

categorising the information you receive in response to your interrogation. This confirms that you are both working from similar ‘maps of the world’; it also allows you to sort information under various headings so that it will be easier to manage.

For example, you might say *“So that 20% refers to the financial aspects, whereas the information about our advertising is part of our marketing strategy.”*

Interpretation

This involves you analysing or interpreting what you are told. You may need to do this by paraphrasing – playing back what they have said in your own words so you can check your understanding of it. Again, this will allow you to confirm that you are all working to the same map of the world.

For example, in response to them telling you they have spent a sum that you know exceeds the budget, you might say *“So are you telling me that we have overspent?”*

Confrontation

Confrontation occurs when you point out inconsistencies in what the other person has said. This can be said in a non-threatening manner – people sometimes contradict themselves without realising. Perhaps they are confused, or have not had the chance to check through all of their information or opinions for coherence.

For example, you might raise the query that *“Earlier in the meeting you confirmed that we were within budget. Now you mention that we have overspent by 5%.”* This gives them the opportunity to change what they are saying, or to give you additional information to explain the apparent discrepancy.

Information

There will be times when you need to provide the other person with information or opinions, perhaps so that they can comment or act, or simply so that they will understand the context of your question.

An example might be to tell them that *“The Board have just approved an additional 20% on the budget for Project XYZ.”*

Explanation

People will usually do their best to give helpful responses. They can often do this better if they understand why you are asking. Explanation, therefore, refers to giving them additional information so they will understand the underlying logic or the purpose behind your questioning.

For example, you might explain that *“I’m asking about the budget because I have to submit any revision needed within the next week.”* or *“The extra budget has been agreed because this is such an important project for the organisation.”*

Illustration

Illustration consists of the use of examples, analogies, similes, metaphors – anything that illustrates what is meant. Describing what will happen, or what needs to happen, would be an illustration, as would telling a story about a similar event in another setting.

An example might be something like *“When I worked on project ABC, we were able to use the DEF System to maintain a close control, over our spending.”* or, at a more metaphorical level, *“This organisation is rather like a racehorse – you have to pay out plenty of money to get the best jockey to ride it.”*

Corroboration

This involves cross-checking the information you are being given, so you can check that it is consistent. You might ask the other person to provide you with more information that will support what they have already told you, as if you are seeking more evidence. Or you might present some of the information you already have to them, so they can confirm that any additional information they may give you will not contradict what you already know.

For example, you might point out *“I already know that Project XYZ has had a total of 5 weeks of delays due to events outside your control. As each week represents 4% of overall costs, this matches the 20% overspend, doesn’t it?”*

Consolidation

Most of us hear, in effect, only about one third of what gets said. In any conversation,

therefore, there is the risk of mishearing, misunderstanding, or simply missing parts of it. Consolidating refers to any actions we take that increase the likelihood that the other person will truly hear what we say. We do this by repeating key points, such as by paraphrasing, which may also serve as Interpretation; by parrot-phrasing - simply repeating their words so they are heard again; or by summarising - taking key points and replaying them in an abbreviated form.

An example might be *“So in summary, we have agreed that 5 weeks delay amounts to 20% overspend, which is matched by the extra 20% budget just agreed by the Board.”*

Crystallisation

Crystallisation occurs when we identify some key point that has arisen within our conversation. It refers to picking out some aspect that ‘holds together’ the various aspects.

For example, you might say *“The key to this is 20% overspend and why it happened.”* or *“The key to this is to prevent any more delays.”*

Confirmation

When we confirm something, we check that both of us have the same understanding of what has been discussed or agreed. This may be done in the form of a consolidation but the aim now is to check shared perceptions rather than (or as well as) mentioning the points again. Note that Confirmation of consistency of understanding differs from Corroboration, which is about checking for consistency within the information itself.

An example might be to say *“So are we agreed then that the key factor is the overspending?”*

Direction

The final item on this list of operations is Direction. Although you may be seeking information, you may need to direct the other person to behave in a particular way. Maybe you need to tell them to go and get the information from someone else, or perhaps you want them to check the files, or to rework the budget figures.

Examples might be *“Please make sure you cross-check all statistics before you send them to me.”* or *“You must arrange a meeting with the Finance Department to sort this out.”*

Review how you use the various operations described above. To do this effectively, you will probably need to make some notes of what you say to people when you are seeking information – it is unlikely you will be able to remember verbatim from previous occasions. You may also find it helpful to plan which of the operations are most likely to be of use to you in specific situations – you can then prepare a ‘prompt’ sheet of interventions that will allow you to be more skilful.