

CIRCULAR "QUESTIONING" IN ORGANIZATIONS:

DISCOVERING THE PATTERNS THAT CONNECT

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This article describes a process of interviewing called circular or recursive questioning. Because this interview format is theoretically derived from General Systems Theory and Cybernetics, the first part of the discussion examines and contrasts the systems concepts with psychologically based approaches. The second part describes the 'why' and the 'how to' of circular questioning.

The circular questioning method was designed to make the connection between behavior and beliefs in a series of open communication loops. Although General Systems Theory and Cybernetics are commonplace in the study of physics, the application to human interactions did not become familiar until the late sixties and early seventies. This systemic way of conceptualizing presents a departure from the psychology of the individual, and has important potential for modifying the way in which we understand problems in organizations.

In recent years, we have come to accept what Auguste Comte said in the early nineteenth century, which is that isolated facts cannot be understood by themselves, but must be seen in their larger context. That the whole must be grasped if one is to see the functions of the parts. Circular questioning provides a method of bringing together fragments of information and relating them to the larger context, the system from which they come.

This interview model was originally introduced by the Milan Associates, a group of four Italian psychiatrists who were experimenting with the application of General Systems Theory and Cybernetics to the treatment of gross psychopathology. The initial findings were published in an article called "Hypothesizing-Circularity-Neutrality: Three Guidelines for the Conductor of the Session." The Milan group, considered among the most creative and innovative in their field, have further expanded their ideas of the use and usefulness of this interview, as have other authors, including Tomm, K., Penn, P., Viaro, M. and Leonardi, P., all of whose work has been published in the family therapy journal, Family Process.

This paper examines circular questioning in its application to a non-psychogenic and unrelated (non-familial) population. (Although the behavior produced in work situations has been described by various authors as being 'neurotic' or even 'schizophrenic' and compared to that of a 'sick' family, our own opinion is that psychiatric language is being used in these contexts to describe non-psychiatric problems, because we haven't as yet developed an alternative language that is particular to institutions

and work life.) The relationships described in this paper are those of managers or consultants interacting with other managers and clients in a way that creates a mutual capacity to reexamine problem situations. It may be said that this interview format creates new space for examination because it permits the participants to view-a-new rather than to review.

As was stated earlier, circular questioning is consistent with a systemic view of human interaction, and is based on a set of assumptions about change. First is the assumption that change is ongoing. People are always changing. Behavior is viewed as multi-determined and connected in a process of mutual influence, and all events are understood to be communications about relationships. The boss who refuses to meet with subordinates, the drug abusing employee, the manager who gives inadequate information to his group; all of these people are conveying information, are "saying something," about these relationships. Since we cannot not behave, we are constantly conveying, as well as evoking, information about the state of the relationships in our system and about the situation in which we find ourselves.

Organizational problems are often generated during periods of change. It is not unusual to hear a manager described as someone who is either unwilling or unable to change. From a systems perspective, the manager may be viewed as someone who may be working very hard at changing, but his changes are an effort to maintain the organization the way it has always been. In a sense, both opinions are correct; the perception of other managers that this person wants to keep things as they are, as well as that of the manager who insists that he is working very hard at changing. To make sense of these interactions, one would need to examine the context in which these differences are acted out. It is not unusual for instance, in time of transition, for part of the system to work towards change, while another part maintains the stability of the organization, namely the rituals and rules that give it its identity and define its culture.

Although it is necessary to elaborate more fully the systemic perspective, it seems equally necessary to contrast it briefly with what has historically been the more familiar thinking in the field of human behavior.

The preeminent view in organizational behavior has been largely based on psychological theories developed to deal with personal growth and individual problem solving. The work of Frederick Herzberg and psychologists such as Abraham Maslow are early attempts at integrating actions of individuals to a series of social conditions that move them, and are a preview of what is to come. In the culture of the eighties, where a group of airline employees refuse to return to work because they question the leadership of their company, the patterns of behavior described by the '50's psychologists and still surprisingly adhered to, at times seem rooted in the past, and often perceived to be motivated by values that have lost some of their urgency to what is now a workforce that never experienced the depression of the 1930's.

There are a number of influential thinkers in the field of organizational behavior who are clearly moving away from both the T-Group model as well as the preoccupation with the behavior of individuals. They include Edgar Schein of MIT in his work on culture (and ritual), Chris Argyris at

Harvard and Russell Ackoff at the Wharton School of Business. Increasing integration of this theoretical model into the OD/OB culture. Systemists have even been taken to task in the Journal of Organizational Development for their unwillingness to accept their own influence with client systems and their tendency to describe their work as value free. (An observation with which we fully concur.)

Nevertheless, one hears more often from trainers about Abraham Maslow and even Eric Berne, than one does about Gregory Bateson. It is essential to appreciate how important the individual remains in psychological theory and organizational consideration. An inheritance from the 19th century romantics, we still celebrate the individual as the center of all activity, the hub of social systems, a view that is further enhanced in North America's historical commitment to the importance of the person. There appears to be a pervasive concern that not to inquire about a person's feelings is a show of disrespect.

Even in studies of groups, it is the individual's behavior that is noted: he or she is perceived as seeking alliances, being compliant, exhibiting either too much or too little aggression, responding with fear, symbolically taking flight, establishing problem relationships and having difficulty in communicating thoughts and especially feelings.

Systems theory offers a different way of understanding, one that does not rely on attempts to change people or question their motives, personality structures, or their feelings. Systemic concepts examine organizations and the way in which they manage change.

There are two major problems that systemists will need to address in order to gain a broader usage among organizational development professionals: one is the need to develop the necessary technology to make the theory operational. Dr. Irving Borwick of Borwick International, Inc., in Boston, has made significant progress in the development of systemic techniques for business organizations through a number of interventions that he and his group has developed. Borwick's work addresses itself to managing change within the organization. How, for instance, productivity can be increased or transitions managed more effectively and more swiftly.

Our literature search, and discussions with colleagues, suggests that the interventions being used presently appear to be borrowed directly from family therapy without significant adaptation to the very different context of the corporation, and are often inappropriate. They hit too hard because they were designed for rigid and disturbed families and they tend to ignore the fact that although you can't be 'fired' from your family, the same does not hold true for your job.

The second potential problem is the wish among new adherents for the systemic perspective to mix systems with the more frequently used model of the individual as inner-driven. The confusion that this creates stems from the systemic understanding of causality as being multi-determined and unpredictable, and the linear logic that views present behavior as a logical process of mutual influence. You cannot at the same time claim that nothing can happen that does not naturally flow from an earlier situation, nor can the source be the flawed actions of one individual.

Circular questioning is a form of interviewing that takes into account this newer epistemology. In the way the procedural interviews are based on a historical and problem-based premise, this newer method of interviewing concerns itself with patterns and rituals and the ways in which they organize behavior. Part of the assumption is that the 'problem' may also have been created by former solutions and that these attempted 'solutions' are information about the organization.

This interview format may be viewed in part as an application of the concepts of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Bateson held that the way in which we see the world around us determines how we think, how we act, and how we organize our existence. He further suggested that these world 'maps' that we operate from are partial; they represent our perception of an experience and the meaning that we give to it, a fragment on which we build a mental construct. In 'connecting' these partial maps, with individuals or with groups, what emerges are larger and varied patterns which suggest new meanings and different ways of understanding, not only behavior, but the connections between behavior; what Bateson has called the "patterns that connect." Circular interviewing introduces a specific pattern of interaction between interviewer and interviewee, consultant and client(s) that encourages this process.

This form of interviewing generates information which may be new to both the interviewee and the interviewer. The intent is to make connections between meaning and behavior rather than to 'investigate' the problem in order to come up with a solution. The interview itself is therefore an important intervention.

The interview questions are not arbitrary or simply an exploratory way of getting to know the organization, although the information generated presents a picture of the organization and its relationship to other relevant systems. In spite of an active interviewer, those being interviewed understand the new learning to have come from their own efforts, their own competence and not only that of the consultant.

In contrast, procedural interviewers often pose questions in order to gather data, identify the nature of a problem and come up with a diagnosis or solution. The intent is often to develop the interviewer's understanding of the situation. Although skilled interviewing will bring new insight into the situation for the interviewee as well, it tends to be more guided than discovered. The tendency is to point things out rather than to challenge premises on which previous assumptions were constructed.

Circular interviewing develops the interviewee's capacity to observe as opposed to gaining insight. As he or she joins the interviewer in examining differences in relationships and different meanings that people ascribe to certain problems, there evolves a capacity to observe connections; connections between people, between people and problems, between ideas, between parts of the organization to the whole and connections between meaning and behavior. As managers often comment, "It isn't simple to answer, you really have to stop and think."

Circular questioning was initiated in the field of family therapy with the primary goal of triggering change in a system, rather than masterminding change for a group or individual. There was no

preconceived notion as to how people should be. The interviews are exploratory rather than corrective, and the goal is to make it possible for the client system to find solutions that are congruent with their own needs and their own values.

STRUCTURING THE INTERVIEW: THE FORMULATION OF HYPOTHESIS

The interviewer begins with one or two hypotheses, or tentative formulations, hunches or ideas that one has about the organization. These hypotheses are based on specific data that has been learned through a telephone call, previous discussion with someone from the organization, or some other source. They are also based on general data that is suggested by what it is one knows about a specific industry, a geographical area or a company's primary activity. Family owned and run businesses, for example, may generate hypotheses about leadership, continuity and family as opposed to professional managers. General hypothesis about banks would probably take into account effects of deregulation and diversification.

These formulations are not truisms. They are not a search for validation. One does not set out to prove them, but rather to test them. From the responses, one develops new hypotheses, different ideas that are then further tested and take the interview into new channels as the information that is produced takes on a new significance and suggests other possibilities to both interviewer and interviewee.

Finally, the non-verbal material, what the interviewer sees and what he or she expects to see but doesn't emerge, is also important data. The danger is rarely in not having enough information, but in having too much.

The hypotheses are tested through a form of recursive questioning. Because information is found in differences, these questions are designed to explore and uncover differences.

Questions that introduce differences:

- a. Differences in Relationships Who is closer? Who is more distant? Who spends more time together?

- b. Differences in Values Who is more concerned? Who is considered to be the most responsible, least responsible? Who usually takes on the most responsibility? Who is most accountable? Who would like to be thought of as most accountable? Who is always punctual? Who keeps people waiting?

- c. Other Relationships
(That often make a difference) In which situation is John more likely to seek advice from someone inside the group or outside the group? If it were outside, would it most likely be someone in another division or someone outside the company? Who outside this group influences John's actions the most? Is this person considered as being knowledgeable about the company, or more informed about business in general?
- d. Differences of Degrees Who more? Who less? When more? Where less? Under what circumstances more likely to?
- e. Differences in Time Like before? What now? How may it become? More before? More now? When more?

This examination of differences links up the behavior and expectations of the various members of the organization, as well as their relationships with people outside this system. It also clarifies elements of actions that are revealed as 'news.'

The questions are always triadic (Ex: How does your boss understand the difficulty that you have with this foreman? What explanation does he give to it? How does this match up with your own ideas? Do you feel closer to your superiors or your subordinates? Which of the two trusts you more?)

The third element is not necessarily another person, but may also be a place or situation (context). (Ex: What do the two of you make of this situation? Who is more disturbed by it?)

There are three main categories of questions:

1. Descriptive questions:

Ex: Could you describe what happens when George and Grace discuss their different perceptions of the direction the company should be taking?

Who is most likely to join the discussion? Which side of the argument would they take?

2. Explanatory questions: (Questions about meaning)

Ex: What explanation do you give to the fact that the competitor's products sell better although you describe them as being inferior? How do you understand?

What explanation does Elsa give to Al's decision to leave the company?

3. Hypothetical and Future Questioning:

Examples of future questions:

Let's imagine that X were to leave; what other reasons might emerge for not going ahead with the project? If you/they should decide to do it your way, for whom would the risk be greater, your boss or? Should the company ever lose this contract, who would be most likely to find a solution?

NEUTRALITY

Circular or recursive questioning allows the interviewer to remain neutral. The questions are constructed in such a way that what remains important is what the interviewee thinks, understands, supposes or describes: it is he or she who remains central rather than the interviewer.

Managers have diverse ways of managing people. Consultants also encounter supervisors who use questionable methods with their subordinates, including verbal abuse, browbeating, blaming subordinates for what are clearly their own actions, etc. More acceptable, but also frustrating are the caring managers who constantly flirt with the danger of serious accidents by covering up for employees who are alcoholic, drug addicted, incompetent or unreliable.

The interviewer does not need to take a position on issues that are controversial to the group and therefore side with one or the other, a move that might invalidate the consultant's role as an outsider, or even an inside-outsider. There are many situations that might jeopardize a consultant's neutrality.

It is the neutral position, the unwillingness to enter into a power struggle about what's right and wrong, that would seem to offer up the possibility for managers to best develop their own sense of responsibility as well as to examine honestly what they can buy into and what they can never learn to accept.

The consultant's neutrality enables and empowers consultees to examine and explore their own moral codes.

At a time when ethics in business, medicine and government have become of particular concern, the neutral interviewer provides the opportunity and the context for people, including managers, to examine their own moral dilemmas. When is information about some of the company's activities most likely to be destroyed? Who in the company is more likely to expect it, know about it? In what part of the organization is one likely to find another point of view? Is covering up for an alcoholic colleague understood more as humanism, or is it more because there seems to be an understanding in the company that drinking goes with the territory? Is it more to protect the addicted individual, oneself, or the company? Which more, which less?

POSITIVE CONNOTATION VS. NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTION

A by-product of human learning is the conviction that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things. Managers who are attempting to deal with problems are also looking for the 'right' way; for themselves, for their employees and for their organization.

There exists a pervasive tendency to associate problems with blame. A request for consultation may be perceived as a wish for change, and interpreted as a statement of something being wrong. If an interview is always understood to be a search for a 'diagnosis' or to 'fix' something and make it right, then the idea of healthy and unhealthy, good and bad, may become incorporated into the search for understanding.

Circular questioning may avoid the attribution of fault by emphasizing meaning rather than intent. Because problems are assessed from a circular perspective, there is no quarrel about causality and there is considerable speculation about multiple influences. "If we were to view what you see as your boss's lack of availability as his way of showing confidence in you by giving you space, how do you think that he would behave if he were really disinterested? How would he show you? Would he be more available?" or "Every time your colleague comes in to work drunk, you show your caring for him by covering up. How would you behave if you didn't give a ----- about him and his future?"

The therapy field has devised ways of relabelling behavior to suggest its various possible meanings. One such way is through reframing. To reframe can be said to be the restatement of a situation so that it can be perceived in a new or different way. Thus, what is thought to be intrusive behavior on the part of a supervisor may be reframed as his or her way of showing interest in a subordinate, while lack of attention may well be an indication of confidence and an expectation that the individual can function independently.

Positive Connotation is another way of attributing well meant intentions to remarks or gestures that are experienced as having unfriendly or hostile intent. Positive connotations, when they are effective, usually encompass a number of acts or behaviors and connects them in a positive way. An example may be something like the following: "Because he does not tell anyone about Laura's frequent absences and inebriation, John is behaving correctly. In this way he is not only showing loyalty to his superior, but is consistent with the company's often voiced concern about remaining humane." The true dilemma for the employee that is suggested in this reframing is the need to remain loyal, self-preserving and consistent with some understood but undiscussed premise in the company about how one behaves when one's colleague is alcoholic. John may be perceived as playing by the rules, and therefore blameless for the consequences of 'covering up' if one examines the situation from this perspective.

It should be stressed that reframing is not technology. It is an attempt to examine possible meanings before making judgments about intent. Intent is an intangible. It is difficult enough to identify our own feelings and motivations without attempting to make judgments of what is in the mind of another at any given time. The reframing is a possible hypothesis to be examined. If it doesn't fit, it is discarded quickly enough.

This style of interviewing can be equally productive with individuals or with groups of people. When using this interviewing method with individuals, the interviewer invariably makes references and 'includes' in the discussion, various people who are not present. It is often helpful, and very vivid for the person being interviewed, if the references were made as if the person or people were present. One may even

indicate to an empty chair. For example, if Joan were here How do you think Kevin understands your actions If we were to ask This type of enactment can be very compelling.

The interview supports interviewees in their personal search for understanding as well as their efforts to find their own solutions. It is clear that suggestions to clients are often necessary and useful, but it is often more productive if they are formulated as hypothetical inquiries rather than solutions. Instead of suggesting that a certain move is necessary, one might ask who would be most for, and who would be most against, if such and such a move were to be made. Another example of a suggestion that is not a solution may be the following: Harry is an abrupt fellow who puts off those who report to him with a brusque manner and minimal discussion. The young men and women who are his subordinates find it difficult to work for him or learn from him and a number have asked to be transferred. Jeff, to whom Harry reports, is troubled, but would like to hold on both to Harry and to the younger staff who bring him their complaints.

The consultant may consider introducing information into the system in the form of a hypothetical question. "Should you all decide that Harry was in fact a good manager, but that his style is more suited for the factory floor than the more formal supervisory system that you prefer, who would be more skilled at such an effort? A suggestion or direct interpretation might be useful but does not carry with it the mechanism by which it can be tested or integrated into the system. Advice is more useful if it takes into account how a change would be received, and the impact it would have on the system or subsystem as a whole.

The following is an example of a good procedural interview that resulted in conclusions coming from the consultant's understanding of the situation rather than the clients. The interventions are contrasted with circular questioning.

John is an accountant and chief financial officer in a small high tech subsidiary of a larger company. He is frequently 'loaned' to other companies as a consultant, a service for which his employer is paid directly. The head of the company, to whom he reports, is a personal friend. The organization is experiencing problems with the parent company and John's boss is thinking of borrowing the necessary funds to buy out the portion held by the other group. He fails to discuss this with John. In discussing this dilemma with a consultant, John states that he "feels unappreciated, hurt, ignored" because he has not been brought into the discussion about a possible purchase. John's consultant, a very competent procedural interviewer, explains to John that he has three roles to consider, that of C.E.O., Friend and Resource/Specialist. These roles are in conflict and he needs to reflect on this problem. This may be considered an educational approach: explain the problem and let them ponder the solution, unless you offer one up.

Using circular interviewing, one might have asked John which of the three roles he valued the most, which was most important to him at this time, in which of these three roles he feels more or less effective, more or less appreciated, more or less solicited, etc. How would he rate them in order of priority AT THIS TIME (the addition of the notion of time, now or later, is very important). Of course, John's first or second answer would probably take them into new fruitful directions as John integrated this

information about roles and began to work with it IMMEDIATELY rather than trying to make sense of this insight about roles after the interview.

The hypothesis about roles emerged sometime after the interview began. Had it emerged as an initial formulation, the interviewer would hopefully not have milked it dry, but tested other ideas as well. As stated earlier, one is best not to fall in love with one's hypothesis and attempt to prove them--"hammer them home" as it were. They are transient formulations and are best treated as such.

There is nothing that is magical or new in the notion of hypotheses. They are an accepted method of all scientific inquiry. Each time we ask a question, we test a hypothesis. The hypotheses in circular questioning are very much the same; they are the idea behind the question, and they are linear. For example, the question you might want to ask is "Does John think that his boss trusts him?" Your hypothesis might be that John's boss hasn't brought him into the talks because he doesn't trust him, or the advice he might give. In circular questioning, you might ask: "Does John's boss trust him less than he used to?" or "If something in the relationship has changed that might result in the boss having less confidence in him, would it have to do more with their professional relationship or the personal one?" "Is there someone new in the boss's professional or personal life on whom he depends or trusts more?"

Circular questioning has been acknowledged as a useful method of discourse in the field of therapy. For the experienced consultant, the questions are familiar. What is interesting about this style of interviewing is, as was stated earlier, it follows a certain way of thinking about information. The epistemology is not linear causal (he does because she does) but is based on the understanding that all behavior is connected: what is being done and what is not being done, who is involved and who is not involved, particularly if one would normally expect them to be, and where and when is this activity taking place. The interviewee functions as co-examiner rather than as informant and is encouraged to develop skills as an observer of behavior rather than be gratified by insight and transient understanding. Behavior makes sense if one examines connections, context and differences.

Circular questioning is not a causal process. It tends to pinpoint dilemmas and knowledge that is not always as welcome as it is useful. I am reminded of my own experience of this intervention. We had been asked to move out of a home that we had been renting for a number of years and a place where our children had grown up. We hated to leave, felt totally helpless and went out in search of a larger and even grander home that we did not entirely need. My friend Luigi Boscolo (of the Milan Group) walked into our new home, complimented us on our premises and asked "Who would you say was the saddest to leave your other house, was it you or your husband?" The question cut like a knife. For the first time I was forced to examine the sadness I felt, and that my children and husband no doubt shared, but that somehow we did not permit ourselves to discuss. Because of fear of being powerless? We finally said good-bye to our beloved old home and began to enjoy the new one as another choice we had made. The question in the way it was formulated was very useful, but by no means was it meant to be small talk.

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