



101 Coaching Supervision Techniques, Approaches, Enquiries and Experiments.

Systemic Chapter: Technique 84 (pages 287-289)

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Systemically Oriented Questions

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Where can this be used?					Typical Level of Supervisee Experience Required	
						
Individual Supervision	Group Supervision	Peer Supervision	Individual Reflection	All levels		

When is this used?

Systemically-oriented questions based on the systemic *Organising Principles, Time, Place* and *Exchange* (see *Philosophy pages 273-278*) enable supervisor and supervisee to 'diagnose' and acknowledge which parts of a relationship system are in and out of balance. As a result, energy, flow and clarity for the supervisee and the system they are working in are restored.

What is the practice?

Systemically-oriented questions enable a shift from a person-centred towards a system-centred perspective by moving beyond focusing solely on the supervisee towards taking the entire relationship system into account.

To illustrate the power of systemically-oriented questions in a coaching context, here are some examples around each of the *Organising Principles*. These are the sort of questions that the supervisor might ask the supervisee in other Systemic Techniques for example 'mapping what is' (Step 7) – see page 280 and 'step towards better (Step 10) – see page 283.

Time

- **Purpose:** asking questions about the order of time acknowledges contributions, people and events in the past to clear the present and future from entanglements and hidden loyalties.
- **Examples:** who served the longest in this system? Who was the last person to join? Who are the founders of this system? Is their original intention known and acknowledged? What were the key events in the history of this company? How many people held this role before you took it up? To what extent has their contribution been acknowledged?



Place

- **Purpose:** asking questions about the extent to which everybody and everything has a safe and respected place in a system, keeps energy, flow and focus in the system that would otherwise be diverted.
- **Examples:** whose contribution to the company is excluded or has been forgotten about? Are difficult events in the company's history known and talked about? To what extent is the contribution of people who left the system acknowledged? Does everybody have the same right to a safe and respected place in the system? Are there roles that seem particularly difficult to fill?

Exchange

- **Purpose:** asking questions about the balance of exchange in a system highlights the extent to which there is a dynamic balance between giving and taking over time, a precondition for enabling all system elements to take full responsibility for themselves and their contributions.
- **Examples:** who in this system gives too much, who gives too little? Who earns the money to pay for the coaching assignment? What is your sense of what you give/receive and what your client gives/receives in the coaching assignment?

How to work with the practice...

Systemically-oriented questions naturally integrate into any supervision conversation. They are useful in untangling complexity and in exploring inertia, stuckness and conflict in relationship systems. Examples of when a supervisor might ask them follow below.

- A supervisee feels unusually drained by a client assignment without knowing why
- A team displays challenging behaviour without any obvious cause
- An organisation struggles to keep a leadership role filled despite each role holder's skills and experience
- A pattern of withholding key information from decision makers - for no apparent reason – surfaces
- An organisation avoids talking about the people who left the organisation and about what they contributed

A word of caution.

Systemically-oriented questions often reveal fresh or hidden information about a relationship system. This might be surprising or even unsettling for the supervisee. It is most useful to treat any reaction in the supervisee as information, acknowledge it and encourage them to allow it to settle so that it can integrate and unfold.



What other uses are there for this practice?

Once supervisees have experienced systemically-oriented questions in supervision they can safely use them with their clients to gently introduce them to the *Organising Principles* and to a more systemic perspective on their issue.

Further reading:

Whittington, J. (2020) *Systemic Coaching and Constellations*. 3rd ed. London: Kogan Page.

Resources:

Available at: www.coachingconstellations.com [Accessed 2 October 2019].