A SOLUTION-ORIENTED APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN A WORK SYSTEM

**Section:**

IN PRACTICE

**ABSTRACT**The growing involvement of counsellors in organisational development is addressed by describing the application of a solution-oriented family therapy approach to conflict resolution in a work system. An account of the intervention outlines the system's storying of the problem, the development of new meanings and the identification of solutions. Key concepts in this post-modern approach are linked with the practices employed.

[**Introduction**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

Since the inception of family therapy, theorists have recommended the value of family systems theory in conceptualising issues in other types of human systems (e.g. Bowen, 1978). The main reported application, however, seems to be in the writers' own work settings. Bowen (1978) devoted considerable attention to a systems analysis of his work system. O'Brian & Bruggen (1985) extended their use of circular questioning and positive connotations to their involvements in difficult committee meetings and agency contacts. Wynne et al. (1986) in an edited volume on systems consultation focused mainly on systems directly involved in the treatment of families.

Counsellors are increasingly involved in providing consultation and facilitation for client groups (Hermansson, 1993; Murgatroyd, 1993), and various frameworks have been applied for this purpose. Brown et al. (1988) drew on the Carkhuff helping skills model in their discussion of counsellors as consultants. In a recent symposium in the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, Hermansson (1993) applied Egan's systems model in his work with a community organisation, Dovey (1993) used radical humanism as a theory of social action, and Chiaramonte & Mills (1993) based their interventions on self-reflection counselling. Murgatroyd (1993) commented briefly on the relevance of skills developed in family therapy practice, but descriptions of the use of a family theory approach are absent from both this and other literature.

This paper describes the application to a work system of a solution-oriented approach, a recent development in family therapy practice (Doherty, 1991) that is part of a wider interest in social construction theory (Hoffman, 1990; Sprenkie & Bischof, 1994). This approach may be particularly suited to use in a variety of contexts because of its rejection of universally applicable rules and its attention to the unique nature of individual 'stories'. Also, family therapists now employing this approach have started to challenge old barriers which have divided 'family work' from therapy in general (de Shazer, 1991). This growing flexibility suggests the relevance of the ideas in contexts larger than families.

[**Solution-oriented post-modern therapy**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

Post-modern family therapy, also often called narrative or solution-oriented therapy, is a relatively recent development which has been signalled (Doherty, 1991; Hoffman, 1990) as the first major departure from general systems theory in family therapy. While some developing this approach are based in North America--for example, de Shazer (1991), Goolishian & Anderson (1990) and Tomm (1987, 1989)--an important international influence has originated amongst a group of practitioners in Australia (e.g. White, 1989; Jenkins, 1990) and New Zealand (e.g. Epston, 1989; Waldegrave 1990).

The approach can be seen as part of a larger movement in society away from the presumed universality of theory and the search for truth, key aspects in modernist and then structural thinking, to an insistence on a range of available meanings, dependent on context. 'Texts', or stories, can be 'de-constructed' to critique dominant meanings and raise to awareness hidden ones. A consideration of language usage is thus an important feature.

Therapists using this approach see themselves as conversational artists, rather than technical wizards or behavioural engineers, dissolving problems through liberating dialogue (Doherty, 1991). Healing occurs during the process of searching for meaning.

The therapist begins by eliciting from the family the problem-saturated story, which will portray the present dominant meaning. The problem is then externalised and framed as acting upon family members (White, 1989). This stage presents the problem as the grammatical 'subject' of the story, acting upon the family as grammatical 'object'. A series of open questions are used to develop the telling of the story, tracking the influence of the problem upon the family. Then questions are asked to trace the family's influence upon the problem, the family at this point becoming the grammatical subject and the problem the object. In this way, families are enabled first to separate their identity from the problem and then to identify previously unnoticed ways in which they have had influence over it, which are termed 'unique outcomes'. Solutions which can be highlighted and developed to further combat the problem are thus located, and families encouraged to examine their emergence and influence in detail. In this way, alternative meanings which have been buried beneath the dominant problem-meaning emerge. Unique outcomes may be historical, relating to past experience; current, relating to activity in the presence of the therapist; or future, displayed in plans and intentions (ibid.).

The therapist does not ignore the social context of the problem. Following the ideas of Foucault (see e.g. Foucault, 1977), dominant social meanings ascribed to problems, which place people as entirely the authors of their distress, are challenged to expose the part these meanings play in maintaining the existing social order (White & Epston, 1989). Questioning generates information about the influences of economic status, ethnicity, class and gender upon the family. These meanings are identified in the story and incorporated in the understanding of the problem (Waldegrave, 1990) so that they too may be explored in relation to unique outcomes. Family members' attempts to address their poverty, for instance, are thus given meaning in the context of their general problem-solving skills.

Because of the emphasis on language in this approach, metaphor, with its layering of meanings, can be a useful tool. Transposing this from his previous more strategic method, Epston has used metaphors frequently, particularly in work with children (see e.g. Epston, 1991). Imagery emerging from conversation with the family is developed to illustrate and highlight new meanings. The Family Centre at Lower Hutt in New Zealand has taken this further, using a system of extended metaphor delivery at the end of therapy sessions to bring together new meanings, drawing on culturally appropriate imagery and mythology (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993).

[**Differences between families and work systems**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

Family therapy theorists have always been aware of the applicability of their conceptual frameworks to larger systems, including work systems. Whilst recognising similarities between families and work systems, important differences also need to be noted when considering work system interventions using family therapy techniques (Borwick, 1986).

Most work systems involve a considerably larger number of people than most families. In order to manage the process, provide equality of participation and ensure that the discussion remains focused, the group facilitator needs to plan activities with more attention than a therapist working with a family might. In particular, the opening part of the first session, where the group becomes engaged in the task with the facilitator, and the story of the problem is told, requires careful management.

Secondly, because of the duration of family life and the centrality of family to members' existence, family members' experience is more likely to 'dove-tail' than that of work system members. This may render the descriptions of problems in work systems more complex, disjointed and difficult to follow. Conversely, it may also allow for greater flexibility and easier identification of sub-plots and therefore unique outcomes.

Members of work systems are likely to rate the importance of the work system in their lives quite differently from one another and thus may possess very different levels of motivation for change. The facilitator therefore can typically expect only short-term involvement in the resolution of problems by all members.

Work system members come from different family cultures and will accordingly have developed different strategies for the ordinary resolution of problems. This again may create a complex landscape for the facilitator, but allows for wealth and variety in the identification of options. Differences in family style also bring with them a fear that others' strategies may be dangerous to some individuals. This requires the facilitator to be particularly mindful of issues of individual and group safety.

Seniority in a family is typically relatively clear and stable. In a workplace, however, seniority and status are complex, being a common source of disagreement and altering with time as members' positions change in relation to each other. Seniority according to age or length of time in the work system may contrast with seniority based on formally ascribed status, which in turn may not equate with informal status related to responsibilities carried or social contact.

Finally, written documents are often available to the work system facilitator. These can be requested in advance of group contact and studied in order to track particular themes, gain an initial impression of the 'problem-saturated' story, and identify the ways in which members have already acted to influence the life of the problem.

[**The story of a work system intervention**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

This story concerns a large and well-established department in a tertiary education institution which had reached a point of serious and apparently unresolvable conflict. In the post-modern tradition, I identify the story told here as mine and recognise that others involved would tell a different one. I am aware also, in writing it, of diminishing, arranging, sifting out and forgetting. The result is at once more cohesive and more barren than the lived experience.

Three areas are frequently problematic in tertiary education administration: the restructuring of programmes, the allocation of new staff positions, and the appointment of heads of department. In all these cases, decisions touch the working lives of every staff member, demanding the reorganisation of existing territory, changes to workloads, and challenges to status. Dilemmas tend to surface about the relationship between academic freedom and the need for shared responsibility, about the tension between research and teaching, and about competing needs for resources. These are unresolvable because they usually originate in contexts external to the individual department. All these elements were present in the story recounted here and represented external factors impinging on the working life of the department.

[**The presenting problem**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

The problem presented by the representative of a small steering committee from a department of about 20 academic staff concerned serious conflict about the need to rethink the structures of programmes. The request was for me to facilitate a conflict resolution workshop which all staff would attend. Because of my own familiarity with the institution, I had good knowledge of the wider institutional culture, a reasonable understanding of the working of the particular department, and an acquaintance with a number of the staff. However, my age and my own ascribed status within the institution ranked me in the middle range of this department; as a woman I risked being identified too closely with the small number of women in the department; and my range of acquaintances was uneven.

[**Pre-workshop preparation**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

Having agreed to participate, I asked to receive any available written material to provide a background to the problem. A large dossier arrived, containing minutes of meetings, memos, and letters to departmental staff. It was immediately clear that communication had become acrimonious and that progress was at a standstill. Attempts to manage the situation had involved employing increasingly formal communication procedures, especially in the context of meetings. The problem-saturated story (White, 1989) was clearly in evidence, and tension had if anything been increased by a felt pressure to make decisions and put the unpleasantness in the past.

I then initiated a series of individual contacts, starting with the Head of Department and some other members of the steering committee, asking the nature of the problem and what it was hoped the workshop could achieve, to increase my understanding of meanings and to focus from the beginning on solutions (Doherty, 1991). I also asked whom else to contact to provide me with alternative views and contacted those named. In addition to gaining a good overview of the situation, I established, from the range of different perspectives to which I was referred, that there was considerable goodwill towards resolving the conflict.

Next, I invited all department members to write to me confidentially indicating their perceptions of the problem and the hoped-for results of a workshop. Over half responded, providing a quite different picture from that available in public documentation. While minutes of meetings named the problem as programme restructuring, most confidential material indicated a serious concern about stressed interactions and loss of rewarding communication amongst staff. In addition, members were frustrated with difficulties about leadership, some seeing the leadership style as inappropriately invasive, others objecting to what they described as continual unreasonable challenges to the leadership. Participants stated as potential outcomes: 'for us all to speak to each other again', and 'that people feel able to go into each other's offices for a chat'. They also wished to clarify leadership issues. The other major concern was the expectation that the workshops would be upsetting. Some wrote of the need for 'some blood-letting'; others of the fear that we would 'have blood on the carpet'. Overall there was a clear need to focus on process and inter-personal issues first, rather than addressing the content area initially identified.

This stage of the process can be likened in family therapy to the collection of referral information and to the engagement of the family and the exploration of the problem in the first session (see e.g. Barker, 1986): referral information is regularly collected from a limited number of family members. It also conformed to Gray's recommendation (1993) that the organisational consultant's first task be to discover how members themselves understand their organisation. While it may have been risky to approach only some department members, in fact a good overview was provided by speaking with those suggested by others as holding different points of view to their own. Exploring the problem's story at the start of the first workshop, with the active participation of even half of the staff, would have occupied a disproportionate amount of time. In addition, this stage provided the opportunity to focus on process strategies for the workshop that would be most likely to provide a context in which to identify unique outcomes (White, 1989). For instance, it seemed wise to avoid using formal meeting procedures, minutes and votes, since these processes had played an important part in the problem-saturated story.

The final part of this stage was to negotiate the length of time and the place for the workshop. The steering committee was unwilling to commit itself to more than a day, fearing staff resistance. The compromise was that we meet for two separate half-day sessions. In this way I hoped that outcomes might develop between sessions. The place chosen was comfortable and away from the usual work environment. In order to sidestep the usual meeting culture, I indicated to the committee that we would not sit at tables, that minutes would not be taken although we might need to write down any useful outcomes, and that we would not be voting. I also determined mentally that 'blood-letting' was unlikely to contribute positively to the generation of solutions, since this approach seemed to have been attempted already on several occasions and to have proved unsuccessful.

[**The first workshop**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

The first half-day workshop began with my asking for a brief introductory comment from all participants, each person stating their hopes and fears for the event. The intention was to engage participants, to focus discussion, and to identify manageable goals that could lead to a sense of positive outcome.

The department was then asked to tell the story of its history, beginning with the first person to be appointed. As each person reached the point where the next person had arrived, that person took up the story. This exercise served a number of important purposes and occupied the major part of the first workshop. The stories told about the past inevitably reflected present pre-occupations, but enabled them to be aired in an unthreatening way. With the diversity of members' perceptions and involvements, it also provided the first indications of 'unique outcomes', and accessed the organisation's collective memory bank, as recommended by Chiaramonte and Mills (1993). Organisationally it provided structured participation, with no-one needing to fight for the right to speak, a common problem when formal meeting procedures are used. Also, a number of the conflicts which had emerged from the pre-workshop information seemed to be between more recently appointed staff, and thus their contributions came last. Finally, pre-workshop information had suggested that older members were sad to have lost a sense of community and newer ones experienced the department as lacking a joint purpose. The exercise provided a valuable reminder of, or education about, the department's identity, as evidenced by the number of members who subsequently indicated how much they had enjoyed the exercise, and recommended that the history be written down at some point.

The story revealed a number of important themes. Difficulties with leadership were a dominant feature, including staff members having felt powerless and ignorant of procedures in the early stages of the department's life, the subsequent sudden death of a head of department, a second head whose strengths did not lie in administration, two lengthy periods without a head, and the recent determination to select a new head of department who would offer strong administrative leadership and create a cohesive department.

A second theme involved a growing tension over the years between 'generalists' and 'specialists'. Initially staff had been required to teach in a wide variety of areas and generalism therefore had been regarded as a great strength. More recently, knowledge, reputation and publication record in specialist areas had received higher status and provided the key to professional promotion.

This theme was closely linked to the third: a perceived tension between good teaching and good research. Generalists were more likely to perceive themselves as committed to high-quality service to students. Specialists, on the other hand, argued that their research expertise represented a key strength in their teaching.

These last two themes led directly into the next activity, devised to consider the impact of wider systems on the department. Members were asked to divide into pairs for discussion, again a departure from normal meeting procedure, and encouraged to join with someone with whom they would not usually talk, in order to initiate contact in relationships that had become strained. Most people made choices that contributed to this purpose. Each pair was asked to discuss and list the outside influences on their difficulties as a department. These were then plotted by the whole group on paper on the floor, with the department itself in the middle and outside influences placed at distances from the department that represented their degree of impact upon departmental life. There was very little disagreement about either the choice of outside influences or the extent of their impact.

This activity allowed for a critical analysis of external stresses on departmental life, similar to a social justice approach to family therapy (Waldegrave, 1990). It served to highlight the increasing pressures derived from a requirement to maintain old areas of strength, develop new content areas, sustain traditional competition with their equivalent departments in similar institutions, offer more courses, and vie with newer institutions for their developing markets. These pressures were situated in a context of reducing resources, deteriorating staff/student ratios, uncertainties about the viability of identified opportunities, the potential risk of redundancies, and fears about government interference with 'academic freedom'. In such a climate, major restructuring of programmes was recognised as understandably creating considerable tension.

The first workshop ended with a review of what had been covered and a commitment to focus next on those issues internal to the department which were causing conflict.

[**The second workshop**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

The time between workshops not only allowed members to reflect on the work to date, but also made it possible for me to identify emerging unique outcomes and influence over the life of the problem, as evidenced in both the historical account and the activities and attitudes of members during the workshop (White, 1989). It would have been difficult to reflect adequately on this while the workshop was in progress, given the wealth and complexity of the material put forward and the numbers of people involved in the discussion.

Historically, three periods in particular represented 'unique outcomes'. On the first occasion, department members had been obliged jointly to take responsibility when the head of department had suddenly died. No-one had had any useful previous contact with the range of tasks needing to be completed. Department members had spoken with pride of their achievements then and of their attention to each other's emotional welfare at a time of great stress.

Secondly, when difficult decisions needed to be made about appointments to two new positions, this had been well managed even though the process was lengthy, again with attention to the emotional implications for individual members.

Finally, when the recent head of department's appointment was pending, the department had worked well to establish guidelines for its leadership requirements and there had been much satisfaction at the time with the appointment.

In addition, an observable unique outcome in the workshop itself was the obvious co-operation and goodwill expressed towards each other, the facilitator and the process.

The three historical unique outcomes were addressed first. Members were asked to move into three groups on the basis of which event they wished to work on recalling in more detail. The groupings happened to bring together some of the individuals who had been in most direct conflict with each other. Those who had joined the department since the most recent historical unique outcome were placed in the third group to assist in detailing and extending the list of leadership qualities identified at the time of the head of department appointment, since these had been generated then as a solution to previous leadership difficulties.

The first two groups were asked to work on a range of questions developed to explore the dynamics of their outcomes. These included: 'How did you make the difficult decisions?'; 'How did you talk to each other?'; 'What did you do to keep things fair?'; 'How did you manage difference and disagreement?'; 'How did you correct mistakes?'; 'How did you look after each other's needs?'

Outcomes from the first two groups were then shared with all the workshop participants. In summary, a picture of serendipitous good-willed co-operation emerged, which included much informal communication, a high level of tolerance for differences and a preparedness to revisit decisions if they began to seem inappropriate. Members had worked to be sensitive to each other's needs and feelings when stress levels were high, mainly by listening without criticism. They had enjoyed sharing responsibility and the contact with each other it engendered. All this was in marked contrast to the recent attempts at formal meeting solutions which had become a part of the problem.

The third group then summarised their discussions on leadership qualities. They detailed the list originally developed and their additions to it. Open decision-making, a democratic philosophy, shared responsibility, firm management, a good overview, tolerance, goodwill, easy contact with all department members, and demonstrable fairness, were all highlighted. It was then realised that these qualities were not restricted to leadership but offered useful strategies for good working relations amongst all department members.

Next, the current unique outcome which had emerged during the previous workshop, the evidence of co-operation and goodwill, was used to develop the possibility of useful co-operation and communication between differing elements in the department, such as the generalist/specialist division. A conversation was facilitated between two individuals, who perceived themselves as possessing different and complementary strengths, focusing upon the use of good communication skills, especially good listening, an uncritical approach, and a clear expression of both needs and strengths.

Using the solutions generated by all groups, the members of the department were then encouraged to identify in which arenas they could most usefully apply these first. They identified two new staff appointments which were presently under way as a beginning point, and determined that resolution of the programme restructuring difficulties which had prompted the initial request for the workshop would progress more easily if issues were addressed with less haste.

The workshop ended with my narrating an extended metaphor which I saw as relevant to the department's culture and illustrative of its processes (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993). The aim of this was to encapsulate both the dilemmas which had been explored and the solutions generated. The department was likened to a great fleet embarked on a long voyage, not moving to battle, but engaged upon a quest. Like all good quests, the journey was far more interesting than the goal, which could well remain illusory. The fleet was made up of an unusual variety of vessels, dating from different periods and built for widely differing purposes. Each ship had a captain, responsible for the crew, but also for participation in the activities of the fleet. While a land-based quest merely required an unruly band of individualistic adventurers, capable of feats of tremendous courage and skill, a fleet demanded more careful co-operation, the sea being unpredictable and there being a need for ships to stay in regular contact. In such a case, a fleet admiral had a hard job deciding where to sail his own vessel because he needed to stay in touch with each of his ships, maintain an overview of the fleet, keep an eye on the weather, and not forget the long-term purpose of the quest. I stated that the solutions they had generated together contained some good advice for both ships' captains and an admiral, and wished them well on their quest.

[**Follow-up**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

Follow-up has been informal, through my concern not to interfere in the functioning of new solutions by resurrecting the plots of problem-saturated stories. A number of unsolicited comments from a range of department members, however, have focused on how much individuals enjoyed the workshops--to their surprise. Puzzlement was expressed at the lack of 'blood-letting'. Individuals were reported to be again on easier terms with each other. Decisions with the new appointments had moved smoothly. The head of department had suggested having an elected chairperson for staff meetings; and work on the restructuring, after a period of rest, had been resumed and was progressing slowly.

[**Conclusion**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=ddc99623-5365-42e0-bb5d-7f96e4aaff22%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl#toc)

This paper has considered the application of solution-oriented techniques to the workplace. I have provided a detailed account of one group's generation of new meanings to demonstrate the relevance of post-modern approaches in family therapy for work systems, linking ideas from the therapy literature with the practices employed in the workshops. The approach described recommends itself to counsellors, consultants and facilitators as a strategy for addressing the problems of workplaces in a number of ways.

The philosophy underlying solution-oriented therapy encourages a shift in thinking away from the pathologising of problems. Groups need thus no longer define themselves by the nature of their problems, but can instead explore the complex interaction that takes place between problem and group. This process also allows for the recognition of circumstances beyond the group which impact powerfully upon its functioning.

The method encourages the emergence of a positive climate for change and taps participants' own strengths and creativity in identifying past solutions and developing related strategies for resolving present difficulties. The facilitator is not cast in the role of visiting expert, but rather is an assistant who encourages the telling of stories to uncover the group's pre-existing expertise at resolving difficulties, as recommended by Imber-Black (1986). A non-hierarchical and liberatory approach can be of particular value for work systems, situated within larger systems which are organised along traditional hierarchical lines, in developing more creative ways of managing their own structures (see also e.g. Dovey, 1993).

The approach draws directly on the individual history and culture of an organisation. By recognising and affirming its unique nature, the most appropriate solutions for the organisation at that point in time can be developed.

Lastly, the focus on narrative, with the recognition that there will be a range of meanings about the problem, frees both facilitator and group from an obligation to sift out 'the truth' from the different accounts of events and perspectives within the system. Instead, the variety of meanings available can be perceived as providing breadth and flexibility in the identification of solutions and in the generation of stories that will turn vicious cycles into virtuous ones.

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