Seven Assumptions of a Solution-Focused Conversational Leader

By Robert C. Paull and Carol Z. McGrevin

How can we consistently create effective conversations in our interactions with students, teachers, parents, and community members? How can we listen compassionately to stakeholder concerns while transforming these concerns into actions that lead to solutions? What assumptions should we maintain to move conversations from complaints about kids, parents, teachers, and schools to conversations that produce results?

Most of a manager's day is spent engaged in conversation (Mintzberg, 1980). This comes as no surprise to school administrators. We are either talking with individuals, working with others in groups, or talking on the phone. In a way, memos, articles, letters, and policy statements are written conversations. Since such a significant percentage of a school leader's time is devoted to conversation, reflecting on how we converse is one way to fine tune our leadership.

Conversational Assumptions

Innovations in producing solutions in short-term psychological counseling, referred to as *solution-focused brief therapy* (Walter and Peller, 1992), have identified seven valuable assumptions that school leaders can use to create solution-focused conversations in schools.

Just as clients turn to psychologists for help in solving problems, school stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and support staff members—turn to administrators for solutions in education. Just as psychologists

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hold therapeutic conversations in individual and group counseling sessions, school leaders hold conversations in conferences, classrooms, offices, on the playground, and in the community; like psychologists, school administrators are conversational leaders.

Effective psychologists and school leaders know how to manage these conversations to help the client or stakeholder move toward solutions. While specific conversational skills are extremely valuable in producing solutions, our underlying assumptions about the stakeholder and constructing solutions are more important. If our underlying assumptions are not aligned with producing solutions, no skillful manipulation of communication techniques will be powerful enough to mask our imbedded message.

The assumptions of solution-focused brief therapy are derived from the work of numerous psychologists including Berg, Davis, de Shazer, O'Hanlon, and Weiner (Gilligan and Price, 1993). The assumptions that follow are presented in a school leadership context. They have been selected and adapted from assumptions found in John L. Walter and Jane E. Peller's book, *Becoming Solution-Focused in Brief Therapy* (1992).

1. Focus on Solutions.

Focusing on the positive, on the solution, and on the future facilitates change in the desired direction. Therefore, focus on solution-oriented talk rather than on problem-oriented talk.

This is not to say there are no problems. Everyone recognizes there are problems in education. This first assumption simply means that as long as we are looking at the problem, we are attending to what we do *not* want and not to what we *do* want; we are attending to the past and not the future.

Focusing on the problem diverts attention from efforts to produce solutions. Parents, for example, who are focused on the problems their children are having with peers, attitude, drugs, or schoolwork are not focused on how to solve these problems. They do not think about the times when the problem may not have existed, when they and their children have solved problems in the past, or how they might begin to solve these problems now.

School visions, mission statements, goals, objectives, and exit criteria are all central in enabling us to focus on solutions, on the positive, and on our desired direction. Therefore, they need to be the focus of our conversations. In sports, successful athletes form an image of their success as mental preparation for their games and events; speaking about solutions—focusing on what we want—helps us to imagine the steps we might take to achieve them.

2. Find Exceptions.

Exceptions suggest solutions; exceptions to every problem can be identified by the administrator and the stakeholder(s), which can be used to build solutions.

Initially, this assumption seems to fly in the face of common sense. If stakeholders have been doing everything they can to solve a problem and it still exists, how much sense does it make to assume there are times, or exceptions, when the problem does not occur?

When we have worked on a concern for a long time. we get attached to one set of expectations about what the solution should be. We lose our flexibility. Other strategies or events may be diminished as inconsequential because to the stakeholders involved, the "exceptional" times do not represent "real" solutions. They may also discount them because the exceptional times are not consistent and the problem appears so much larger than the exception.

We can illustrate this point with a common experience—the student and teacher who don't get along. The student does not see any times when the teacher likes him or her. The teacher sees few times when the student makes a concerted effort to be successful in class. In addition, the teacher is almost always unaware of what his or her own actions are at the time the student is being successful. Let us look at an example:

Mrs. Sandor and Albert are not having success together in class. We ask Mrs. Sandor, "What class activities does Albert engage in when he is doing well in class?" She responds with, "He does all right in class discussions and he likes to draw." Then she returns to discussing the problem.

She does not realize that it is the lesson during which Albert is successful that has provided the opportunity for his success and may be the key to unlocking a more productive relationship. Albert, on the other hand, can only repeat that the teacher does not like him. He also is too quick to gloss over his own responses to the question, "What are you doing during those times when you and Mrs. Sandor are getting along better?" Neither stakeholder sees the exceptions in their own behavior as the key to solutions.

When embroiled in such a problem, stakeholders are talking about the *past* rather than addressing the future; it is the role of the solution-focused conversational leader to look *forward* by identifying and building on the exceptions. Working with the stakeholder to elicit and construct a vision of the exceptions, the administrator keeps the conversation on the road to a solution.

Sometimes administrators will want to encourage stakeholders to look beyond their own school community to discover exceptions elsewhere. The basic question becomes, "What schools with similar resources

and similar circumstances become 'exceptional' schools by solving this problem?"

Once exceptions are identified, it is the leader's job in the conversation to encourage the stakeholders to work on the exceptions so they occur more frequently. Using exceptions gives the stakeholders an increased sense of control over what had seemed an insurmountable problem. It is on exceptions that greater successes are built. The solution-focused conversational leader's role is to see exceptions as significant and the road to solutions.

3. Identify Changes.

Change is occurring all the time.

This assumption highlights one of the dilemmas in making evaluations and assessments about stakeholders. Normally, we speak of what *is*. We do not focus on the changing nature of people or situations; instead, we focus on a static statement of what they *are*.

We say aloud (or to ourselves) that a particular stakeholder is supportive or is not supportive. We don't say, he or she appears to be supportive or not supportive. We don't say, he or she is *becoming* supportive. We assess their involvement as having a fixed quality. This keeps us from easily identifying changes that are taking place. It is not easy to talk about stability, sameness, or problem maintenance and then try to explain how students, teachers, or schools change and grow.

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It is more powerful in conversation to assume that change is occurring all the time and support our stakeholders in selecting and identifying those visions, changes, and ways of becoming that they like and would like to see more frequently.

4. Start Small.

Small changes lead to larger changes.

Stakeholders who seek solutions will frequently describe a multifaceted problem. It is easy to become enmeshed in the many negative aspects of such a problem.

In more productive conversations, leader and stakeholder work together to construct one or more solutions that address some aspect(s) of the problem. We might start with some version of two questions:

1. Under what circumstances would, or are, these problems not present? This is a search for an exception to build upon.

2. What would you like to change first about all this? What can I help you do that will let you leave my office feeling we are on track?

Mastering a small change can lead the stakeholder to larger changes. After he or she sees that it is possible to bring about a small change, the successful experience may lead them to taking on a larger change.

5. Listen to Stakeholders.

Stakeholders are always giving us valuable information. They are showing us how they think change takes place.

Whatever stakeholders do, whatever they say, they are giving us useful information about what we should do to bring about change. This does not mean that every person we interact with recognizes that the success of the school community is important to them. Violent or abusive young people or adults, for example, may not be, or may not see themselves, as stakeholders. Nevertheless, even they are giving us information about how they see change taking place. They are giving us information about what we should do next.

Our experiences in coaching teachers in developing new classroom strategies may give some insight into this assumption. Sometimes in clinical supervision observations and pre and post-observation conversations, we assume, although we do not state, that certain teachers are resistant to change. Nevertheless, the subtle underlying messages in our conversations will reflect this negative belief.

Rather than seeing the actions of these teachers as resistance, it is more powerful in solution-focused conversations to assume they are showing us how they think change takes place. We can then incorporate their perspective into the change process.

Focusing on the problem diverts attention from efforts to produce solutions.

If we are to be solution-focused in conversation, we should take them at their word and assume that they, too, are seeking solutions. We can then construct solutions together rather than seeing them as resistant or an aspect of the problem. In our conversation, we might ask them how they see their current classroom activity working and how it is related to the strategy development we are working on together. Then we can use their response as we work together to identify the next step that they can take in their development.

During classroom observations we sometimes select what we would work on if we were that teacher. We, of course, are not that teacher and it is the teacher who needs to identify the change and the size of change he or she wants to make within the context of the school mission and vision.

Sometimes it is not the teacher who is resistant but we who are being inflexible by insisting that transformation in classroom strategies take place at a certain pace and in a specific way.

6. Construct Meaning.

The meaning of experience is not imposed from without or determined from outside ourselves. All of us give meaning to the people, events, and objects in our lives.

This assumption is the most difficult one for many of us to conceptualize. It is reminiscent of the work at the National Center for School Leadership that suggests effective principals communicate significant meaning regarding the tasks in which they participate (Scott, Ahadi, and Krug, 1990).

These principals pay attention to the meaning their actions will have for their stakeholders. They understand that for the stakeholder any action carries the meaning the stakeholder gives it. These principals consciously identify the meaning they want to stand for and they align their speaking and actions to that meaning.

The principal, for example, who is working to build an understanding of the importance of staff development will strive to participate fully in staff development sessions not only for what he or she will gain, but because of the meaning that stakeholders will attach to that participation.

There are other implications to this assumption. One is that the meaning of experiences is contextual: In different contexts, actions or events have different meanings. A raised hand means one thing in a classroom, another at an auction, another in a courtroom, and yet another hailing a cab. A second implication is that we all, intentionally or unintentionally, create meaning in our experiences for ourselves, but we and our stakeholders also create meaning in interactions with each other. An experience or event occurs and together we create an interpretation about the meaning of that event. For our school community, we create that interpretation in conversation with others.

In conversational leadership, the meaning of events and experiences is intentionally created in conversation and these meanings are solution-focused. Each of us gives meaning or significance to our experience. With the participation of others, the conversational leader consciously works to create a solution-focused meaning or significance for events.

7. Encourage Resourcefulness.

People are resourceful and can solve their problems.

This is our final and most critical assumption. It is an adult version of "Every child can learn." It is a statement about the potential for basic wholeness or wellness of all stakeholders. It pictures all stakeholders as capable. It is a no-deficit model that is at the core of all the other assump-

tions. It is the belief that, over time, we are capable in our interactions with others of creating the solutions we all want.

In our interactions with teachers, parents, and students we know what a difference the belief in a child's ability to learn makes. Our belief, our assumption that all stakeholders have the ability to learn or solve their own problems is equally important with students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members.

Summary

The assumptions we bring to a conversation matter, for it is primarily in conversations that administrators lead. Solution-focused conversational leaders start with the belief that there are solutions and listen carefully to their own words and the words of others because they recognize that, ultimately, the words of both either empower the problem or the solution. ~*B*

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