

Searching for meaning and understanding - Encouraging couples to collaborate not conquer.

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One of the more challenging aspects of working with more than one person in the room is the need for structure, particularly in the case of highly conflictual couples. When this is not achieved, a significant amount of time can be spent in session with both partners trying to find someone to blame, or establish who started the problem or when it began.

In the book *Mistakes Were Made, But Not by Me*, Aaronson and Tarvis point out that “married partners are forced to learn more about each other and themselves than they ever expected or possibly wanted to know” (2007:206). When you consider it fully, there are very few relationships that force us to be as flexible and willing to change as is required in a marriage. Because of this there is often a powerful urge for individuals coming to couples therapy to put energy into justifying their position rather than considering alternative points of view.

Additionally, because of the large delay in couples coming for counselling (often about 6 years) there has been a long time of positions becoming entrenched and a greater fear of accepting influence from each partner. Eventually the 4 horsemen are there - Criticism, Defensiveness, Stonewalling and Contempt. The Gottman research was able to predict with 94% accuracy that contempt is what predicts breakdown in a relationship, not anger itself (Gottman, 1994).

Collaborating vs conquering

In order for couples to feel safe to express needs, hopes and dreams, they firstly need to be able to have a conversation without the characteristics mentioned above. Couples can be coached instead to use a softened start up (“I feel... about ... I need...”) taking some responsibility for the problem, self soothing and describing their own feelings and not their partners.

In order to break this cycle, the therapist needs to encourage each partner to collaborate. Collaboration can be defined as “a purposeful relationship in which all parties strategically choose to cooperate in order to accomplish a shared outcome” (Hank 2009).

Collaboration involves self awareness, accepting influence and effective communication skills in order to problem solve and at times a willingness to give up a tightly held position in order to make way for new understanding.



“Collaboration”. Pictured: A human tower (Castell) traditionally built at festivals in Spain.

Indeed, there is a growing literature in business strategy which reports teams that work collaboratively are more likely to have greater resources, recognition and rewards. One example being from the internationally recognised communication and collaboration strategist Evan Rosen who consults to Fortune 500, mid-sized and start up companies. In his book “The Culture of Collaboration” he points out that some of the worlds most successful organisations such as Apple, Toyota, Boeing, Proctor and Gamble and others, use collaborative methods to create value and competitive advantage. Rosen points out the Industrial Age was “command and control” which inhibits collaborative methods that spark innovation while the Information Age is about collaboration.

Understanding the meaning behind a problem and moving to a collaborative cycle

Rather than trying to establish blame, one intervention from Gottman Method Couples Therapy aims at helping couples to find out something new about the other. To search for understanding, underlying meaning and then possible compromise.

The “Dreams within Conflict” intervention (Gottman J, 1999) provides a structure for this and aims to help couples understand the meaning behind a stuck position. One person takes a listener interviewer role and the other is the speaker, partners then swap roles. The listener/interviewer is asked to postpone persuasion, to create a safe environment, for their partner for example not interrupting. The therapist provides the listener/interviewer with a set list of questions (these can be deepened by the therapist where necessary) to be used to interview their partner in order to arrive at the hidden meaning. Questions such as “do you have any core beliefs, ethics or values that are part of your position on this issue”, “is there a story behind this for you”, or “does this relate to your background or childhood history in some way”. The other partner is able to consider the dream/belief that may be underlying the issue and is given a list of possible dreams/beliefs- for example “having a sense of freedom or becoming more competent”. By understanding the meaning behind a problem the couple can look for hidden ways the behaviour makes sense and come away from “what a person did” or is doing to “who” the person is ie. to establish the unexpressed need behind the behaviour. This will then create a compassionate perspective.

A further technique developed by Dan Wile (2011) in Collaborative Couples Therapy (influenced by Bernard Apfelbaum, ego analysis), outlines that a key problem for couples is a loss of voice - an inability of clients to speak on their own behalf or even know what they think or feel. This model deals with a client’s sense of “unentitlement” to their experience and the tendency towards self blame. Wile uses the technique of the therapist acting as the spokesperson for one or both partners in a process of entitling people to their need by suggesting it and bringing out their “leading edge emotion”. This reduces the need for clients to use “fallback measures” such as blame, withdrawal or fixing things.

The following is an example of how the Dan Wile intervention of therapist acting as the spokesperson can be used. The couple who I will call Graeme and Christine had been struggling to communicate about their sense of feeling undervalued (Graeme) and blamed (Christine).

Therapist: “Graeme, I am going to guess at what you might be feeling here - I’ll be you talking to Christine: “Christine, I’m scared of failing at work and in my home life, I’ve failed

in my life before. I remember what it was like when my parents separated and I'm trying to break the cycle. I panic if things at home feel chaotic and I put pressure on you and on myself to get things back under control".

Therapist: Graeme, did I guess correctly at what might be going on for you?

Therapist: Now I am going to guess at what Christine might be feeling. I'll be Christine now talking to Graeme: "Graeme, I'm really wanting to keep you happy and to be the best partner I can be but I'm beginning to feel my self worth is tied up in your approval. I feel like I let you down and that you are disappointed in me. I am worried that one day you will want to be with someone else who you feel will measure up to your standards.

Both the Dreams within Conflict and the Dan Wile intervention outlined above can provide some structure to the session and they also encourage clients to accept influence from their partner, explore fears and collaborate together.

Summary

There is growing literature in organisational management stye describing the benefits of collaboration in creating a successful business strategy. Likewise with couples, encouraging collaboration and helping them to accept influence leads to better outcomes. In order to do this the therapist needs to be prepared to provide sufficient structure in sessions as this creates a safe environment. By guiding couples using a structured exercise such as the Gottman Dreams Within Conflict Intervention and the Dan Wile Intervention the therapist can teach couples to postpone persuasion and to learn something new about their partner, enabling each person to feel more deeply understood.

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