



The Issaquah Protocol

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Purpose

To use a process which models the developmentally appropriate order for questioning in coaching/consulting situations. It can be especially useful for coaches who can look at their own work, and, at the same time, model and reinforce the steps they would use in the field. The progression of types of questions/responses follows the “ideal” progression a good coach uses:

- Factual questions
- What I hear you say
- What I think it means
- Am I getting it right?
- Probing questions I now have
- Ideas this brings to mind
- What do you think?

Time

Approximately 60 minutes

Group Format

Can be used with 10-50 group members. If 10 to 15, use a regular large group format with rounds for each step (people can pass, knowing that you will come back to them at the end of the round). If 15-50, use small groups which first talk with each other and then respond as a group to each part of the protocol. Some people like a minute or so between steps to collect their thoughts and make notes before each new round begins.

Facilitator Tips: It is important to reinforce and reflect on the different kinds of questions and statements used and how that relates to work as a coach.

Process

1. Presentation

Someone presents a dilemma or problem they are working on. It must be an authentic dilemma and not be one for which the answer is already known. The presenter must be open about the issue. If the presenter can frame the dilemma as a question, the feedback will likely be more focused. (5-7 minutes)

2. Group Asks Clarifying Questions

Truly informational, meant to more fully understand what is going on; clarify any places of confusion. (3 minutes)

Note: These are the first kinds of questions we should ask in our work — showing our interest in learning more about what is going on and not leaping to judgment.

Rounds begin

3. Active Listening by the Group (What?)

These are statements which restate what has been said already: "I heard [the presenter's name] say..." or "What I'm hearing is..." (Go-round — 5-7 minutes)

Note: The purpose of active listening is not only to understand better what you are saying but to help the person hear what it sounds like and give them a chance to confirm if it is what they mean to be saying.

4. Interpretive Listening by the Group (So What?)

"What this means to me is..." (Go-round 5-7 minutes)

Note: The purpose of interpretive listening is to get at what meaning you are making from what you are hearing in order to help the presenter think/re-think about what they are conveying.

5. Presenter Check-In

Quickly, are we hearing you correctly? If not, what would you change/add? (2 minutes)

Note: It is easy to think we know what we've heard and then find out we're wrong. It's always good to check back.

6. Probing Questions by the Group

We now go deeper into what is going on and ask questions that help the presenter identify the tensions, paradoxes, and assumptions in the problem or issue, without asking or implying that there should be some reconciliation. Participants write questions on a card or post-it note, then read their questions aloud, one at a time, as the presenter listens. They then give the presenter their questions and the presenter chooses the question that is the "most probing" and responds to it. (10 minutes)

Note: It is important to not get to probing questions until we have done the previous steps—the ones which build up our "right" to go further, since we now have a little understanding about what we are hearing.

7. Presenter Response

Which probing question was the one that made you think the hardest? Why? (2 minutes)

8. Suggestions by the Group (Now What?)

Finally, and only at this stage, can we share ideas to try: "What if she...?" "One thing I might consider/try/do..." (Go-round — 10 minutes)

Note: Suggestions are only made when it is clear that they are welcome and that we have established a level of shared understanding about what is going on. It is a good idea to limit suggestions — too much is too much. As with the other rounds, the presenter is silent and takes notes.

9. Presenter Reflects Back

The presenter shares what she/he is now thinking of doing, concrete steps that can be taken — if only first steps — and ways to bring it back to the group for further work together. (5-7 minutes)

10. Debrief

Starting with presenter, then all participants: (5-7 minutes)

- What was it like to go through these steps? What kind of feedback did you get?
- What was it like to use this process? How useful was it?