

The Not-Knowing Posture

The value of infinite curiosity

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Summary - This article presents some thoughts about the not-knowing posture. Is it easy? Is it valuable? Is it ethical to charge money for your services while assuming a not-knowing posture? Does the not-knowing posture mean you have to completely discard expertise?

Many who are new to the Solution-Focused practice principles seem to get confused by the concept taking a “not-knowing” posture when facing their clients. The not-knowing posture (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) means that as practitioners we work from the assumption that each case is different. Therefore we do not know exactly what the situation of the client is and what he should think or do. This is why in order to arrive at a more satisfying outcome, solution-focused practitioners ask lots of what seem like strange questions that activate their minds.

We did not realize for a long time that the “not-knowing posture” was creating some confusion among the newly learning therapists, coaches, consultants, trainers,

educators and managers. Several questions are raised by confusion.

- Does “not-knowing” imply that it’s easy and that anyone can do this work without training and a solid grasp of the philosophy behind it?
- If we take a “not-knowing” posture, how can we ethically charge money for our services?
- How can I prove to our clients how valuable my service is to them if I don’t know?
- I went through years of education and post-graduate training in order to be an expert and now you are saying I should forget everything I learned?

These are some of the most pressing questions we have come across. Let’s have a look and each of these important questions.

Is it easy?

The phrase ‘not-knowing posture’ might suggest that this is very easy to do and that anyone can do this without much effort. Quite the opposite is true. Taking a not-knowing posture is much more difficult than it might seem, because it seems counter-intuitive at first glance. Both as professionals and human beings we have all kinds of experiences, views and opinions. Actively setting these ideas, knowledge, and skills aside by assuming a “not-knowing” posture is demanding and requires great discipline. Furthermore, applying the solution-building model is a specific expertise in itself. We are not expert in knowing what caused the client’s problem and what he or she should do to solve it. Instead, we are experts on “solution-building conversation,” a process by which clients discover their own most effective ways of achieving their goals. Again, this is not easy: It requires both attention and skills that are quite different from problem analysis.

Is it ethical to charge money for it?

The mere fact that taking a “not-knowing posture” is hard, is not enough justification in itself to charge money for it. Taking a not-knowing posture engages client in their own solution-building process, thus reaching his/her goals much quicker, and with confidence. There is an important difference between telling clients what they should do and helping them to find out for themselves what they should do, instead, clients discover what works for them. Traditional tell-sell approaches to coaching and consultancy are wide-spread but can be problematic. Clients might wonder whether the solution offered by the expert will work in his specific situation. Also, they may wonder whether they will be able to execute the solution effectively without spending additional time and expense. Since the solution-focused approach builds on what has already worked for clients it will therefore not create resistance but energy and confidence. This is probably the main reason why the solution-

focused approach works well and efficiently (Gingerich & Eisenhart, 2000; Visser & Butter, 2006). This efficiency and effectiveness adds value for the client.

How will clients accept the not-knowing posture?

Taking a not-knowing posture is demanding and valuable but how will clients be able to recognize and understand this? After all, clients may expect you as a consultant, coach or therapist to tell them what to do and think. So, what will they think of you when you will instead start asking a lot of questions? From our careful observations of client response to our thoughtful questions many clients report how our questions are because they help them to form goals and discover strengths, they usually find this very helpful. There is nothing like a personal experience to discover the benefits of the “not-knowing” posture as be activated and energized to make further progress.

For example, a colleague of ours, Steve Langer was interviewed for a job as a consultant for a prison population. The Director of the prison who interviewed him asked him many questions, and Steve found himself describing what he might do as a consultant to difficult prisoners who are hostile, angry, and uncooperative. Instead of continuing to explain to the Director, he said to the director, he knows his prison population very well and would he mind playing one of the difficult prison that Steve might work with. The Director took on the challenge and played a very tough prisoner who was causing a great deal of difficulty for the staff. Of course Steve used all the solution-building practices and took the “not-knowing” posture and asked many questions. The Director was so impressed with Steve that he got hired immediately on the spot.

Some clients may be confused, however. After all, they may have some experiences with other professionals which use a quite different approach. Sometimes it may be helpful to explain it. A manager who was talking with her coach, suddenly smiled and

asked: "You do ask a lot of questions, don't you?" The coach replied: "That's right, it helps me to understand your situation better." The manager responded: "Okay, I did not quite expect that but I think it's very useful." On another occasion a client explicitly asked for tips from his coach. The coach replied by answering: "Alright, I will give you some tips. Is it alright if I first ask some questions so that I can focus my tips on your specific situation?" The client said: "Of course, you first need to know more about my situation, I understand. I can see that you are very careful with your suggestions, and I like that."

What about my expertise?

The not-knowing posture does not mean that you know nothing and that you have no expertise. Being able to conduct a solution-focused conversation requires expertise in itself, in addition to others you have, and keep all the other skills you have acquired over the years and continue to learn. While continuing to engage in solution-building conversations, you take a "not-knowing" posture and you postpone your judgments for a while and approach the client's situation with great curiosity. Many experienced practitioners find time and again that their curiosity has been more than rewarded. One reason for this is that the client will feel he's taken very seriously and respect for their own expertise. Another reason is that it will create a conversation in which client and solution-focused practitioner will be able to find tailor-made solutions that will fit perfectly to the situation.

We are not alone in arguing for a not-knowing posture when helping clients. Peter Drucker, the famous management guru, once said: "My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions."

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