

WHAT HAPPENED?

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OBJECTIVE

The first key question in the restorative approach is “What happened?” This is a very powerful question, especially when approached with a tone of curiosity and respect. This game is an opportunity to dig deeper into the “What happened?” question, and to find other questions that will help practitioners hear and understand the full story of the incident in a restorative process.

MATERIALS

You will need a brief scenario and pieces of paper with additional information about the scenario that participants will uncover through skillful question-asking. Each piece of additional information will be covered with a color-coded piece of paper that has the question used to unlock the information printed on the side facing down. You will also need to make a key to help you remember which color of paper has which question. There is an example scenario and set of materials at the end of this packet.

INSTRUCTIONS

Start by explaining that it can be tempting to want to skip over the “What happened?” question in a pre-conference or conference. After all, you will have likely already read a report with a statement about what happened. Ask participant, “Why is it important to start with this question?”

You can further prompt discussion by asking specifically why it would be important to ask the responsible party what happened. Participants may mention that it gives the responsible party a chance to tell their story and take responsibility so that they are starting from a place of empowering accountability rather than defensiveness. It may also give you and others in the process a chance to understand other contributing factors (i.e. unmet needs, previous harm experienced by the responsible party, etc.) that may not be mentioned in the limited scope of the report. It may also provide an opportunity to understand how the responsible party feels and what they think about what happened.

You can also ask participants to reflect on why it is important to ask the harmed party what happened. Participants may discuss the power of having the opportunity to tell their own story, the chance to gauge how they are feeling about what happened, or the chance to understand other relevant life experiences/viewpoints (for example, a harmed party may have experienced something similar before, which can make the experience even more painful).

Also discuss with participants why a tone of curiosity and respect would be important in asking questions related to what happened. Participants may reflect on how your tone and approach as facilitator can either further open or shut down communication about these important issues. Sometimes tone is even more important than the wording of a question.

Explain that the first restorative question is “What happened?”, but often times facilitators need to ask additional questions to gain a full understanding of the incident (especially with younger people who may be less forth-coming).

Set the scene by explaining that in this activity, you are having a pre-conference meeting with a responsible party and are hoping to understand what happened. For example, the responsible party could be a 16-year-old male named James who works at Walgreens.

On the floor, you will have one piece of paper uncovered in the middle with a brief description of the scenario. In a circle around the central piece of paper, place pieces of paper with additional information about the incident and what happened. Each piece of information should be in the form of a quote from the responsible party (as if he or she were answering a follow-up question). Each of the papers with additional information will be covered with a color-coded piece of paper with a question on it, facing down, so that to the participants, it looks like a brief description of the scenario surrounded by different colored blank pieces of paper.

Start by introducing the basic scenario description in the middle that is a short response to the “What happened?” question. For example, the central paper could say, “I took my co-worker, Anne’s, car keys from her purse in the break room and drove her car to my girlfriend’s house. I also took an iPhone that was in her purse and sold it for gas money. The police recognized the plate number and pulled me over, so Anne got her car back.”

Explain that underneath the colored papers surrounding the basic description, are other aspects of what happened that provide a fuller picture of this incident. In order to uncover them, participants will need to ask follow-up questions. These questions must be open-ended! Review with participants what an open-ended question is.

Divide the group into three or four teams and instruct the teams to spend five minutes brainstorming the open-ended, follow-up questions they would like to ask in order to better understand the full picture of what happened. They should make a list of those questions as a group.

After five minutes, go around and have each team ask one question to attempt to un-cover relevant information. Note that some really good questions may not uncover any information. Uncovering relevant information will be part skillful question asking and part continuing to ask until you get lucky, just like in real facilitation! You may want to keep a collective list of good open-ended, follow-up questions on a large paper or whiteboard.

When a team asks a question that is on a colored piece of paper (or a functionally equivalent question), flip over the paper to reveal the question and the additional information it unlocks. Read the additional information out loud to the group. Keep going around in a circle with teams asking one question at a time until all the additional information is uncovered.

Example Questions and Responses:

Q: What were you thinking about at the time?

(Note: trainees may ask something like “Why did you do it?” Talk about how that question can sometimes result in defensiveness and help find a gentle way to get the same info.)

A: I had gotten in a fight with my girlfriend earlier that day. I was really worried that she was going to break up with me. At the time, I was really just thinking about getting to her as fast as I could to try to work things out.

Q: Tell us more about what led up to the theft.

A: I have been trying to save up to buy a car, but it is hard because most of the money from my job goes to helping my mom out with bills. My girlfriend lives an hour away and I wish I could see her more. She is a big support to me and I don't want to lose her. I know that isn't an excuse for what I did though.

Q: How did you feel later after the police pulled you over?

A: I was really scared. I've never gotten in trouble like this before, so it was like I couldn't believe what I had done. I also felt bad because the police said the iPhone had pictures from when Anne got engaged on it that weren't backed up anywhere. I sold it and the police weren't able to get it back.

Q: What has happened since?

A: I lost my job at Walgreens, which has been really stressful for me and my mom. I haven't seen Anne since and am worried about what she thinks.

Q: How did your family/friends respond when they heard about what happened?

A: My mom is really angry and worried about what this means for my future. She is really disappointed in me. I have two younger brothers and she thinks I am being a bad influence. My girlfriend was also upset. We are still having a hard time.

DEBRIEF

What is the power of understanding the full picture of an incident (going beyond the first response)? How was the experience of thinking of open-ended questions? What was challenging and how did you overcome those challenges? What strategies did you develop for skillful question-asking?

LESSON

“What happened?” is the first essential question in the restorative approach and it holds a great deal of power. When we create an opportunity for the responsible party and harmed party to tell the full story of what happened, we build trust and relationship, and also a better understanding of the needs that led to the behavior as well as the needs that have resulted from the harm caused.

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“How did your family/friends respond when they heard about what happened?”

“My mom is really angry and worried about what this means for my future. She is really disappointed in me. I have two younger brothers and she thinks I am being a bad influence. My girlfriend was also upset. We are still having a hard time.”

“How are you feeling about everything now?”

“I feel really bad. I know it was a stupid decision. In the moment, I didn’t think about Anne or anything else, just getting to my girlfriend.”