

TALKING ABOUT PROBLEMS OR CONCERNS

This way of thinking or talking about problems below can be used for individuals or teams. It is called **externalising** the problem. It is a helpful way to explore problems, effects in people's lives and discover or rediscover skills to move forward.

There are 4 parts:

- Choose a **name** for the problem or concern that is non-blaming, it is a particular name you or you and others come up with that is agreed on. The name can be playful or non-blaming but does not decrease the seriousness of the concern. *Naming the problem*
- Exploring the **effects** of the problem in many areas of your life/lives. The ways it operates, what ideas it has for you about yourself, when it first entered your life, times when it has been very influential or not so influential etc *The effects of the problem*
- Deciding whether it is **OK or not OK** with you for the problem to be operating like this. *Taking a stand for or against the problem*
- Saying **why it is OK or not OK** for the problem to keep on going like this. *Justification*

A group or team can meet to discuss a particular problem or concern and open up possibilities for moving towards preferred actions, goals or initiatives.

1. **NAME THE PROBLEM OR CONCERN**

In some circumstances it can be useful to choose your own name or code for the problem. If you and others in your team come up with a name, as discussion proceeds you might change the name as the problem gets clearer and everyone agrees what it is. Once you agree on the name it is important to refer to it as THE (name). This locates the problem outside of the person so everyone can explore the effects of this on their own life (or in organisations effects on workers, management, the organisation and community). This way of looking at the problem helps to explore it more fully and can open the way to review the relationship to it.

Eg. Names for organisational change eg 'the slippery slope', 'the unknown', 'the uncertainty'....

2. **EFFECTS OF THE PROBLEM OR CONCERN**

Each person or the team as a group can brainstorm the effects that the 'eg. unknown is bringing into their life, eg on workers, teams, community, health, social life, identity, job security etc. Take turns so each person gets to explore the effects thoroughly, you can use a whiteboard.

The effects of 'the unknown' are that I'm not confident I am doing what is needed in my role, it talks me into ideas of whether I have the required skills and capacity, it persuades me that there will be a lot of pressure to be different, it makes me think question whether my work is valued etc. It tells me that its OK to eat, smoke or drink more. It wakes me in the night with worry and my blood pressure has increased. It's hopes for me are that I can adapt successfully even if I am not sure what I need to adapt to, it tells me I should be able to predict and know what is needed, it alerts me to stress and effects on me and my family and friends and work mates.

3. **IS THIS OK OR NOT OK?**

Each person can say whether it is OK or NOT OK with them for the problem to be having these effects on their life, maybe some parts are OK and others are not.

4. **WHY IS THIS OK OR NOT OK?**

Each person to say why it is or isn't OK for the problem to be having these effects on your life and the life of others.

3 & 4.

It's OK because organisational change can improve work practices, I respond well to challenges. It's NOT OK because my partner/friends/children are complaining that I am distracted and not enjoying life as much. It's NOT OK because I have lost motivation at work and find it hard to make decisions. I worry I might lose my job or lose interest in work. It's not OK that I am losing sleep and impacting my health.

This way of exploring/talking about problems is called Externalising Conversations, the problem is seen as the problem, not the person seen as the problem. It can reduce ideas of blame and shame. Taking an attitude of curiosity about the problem can help with sensitive topics. It does not in any way decrease responsibility for the problem but can open up a thorough exploration of what the problem is bringing into the lives of the people affected by it. It is known as **the problem story**. It is important to do **double listening**, for things that are outside the problem story that help to move into **the alternative story**.

(Ref. White, M, 2007, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, W. W. Norton & Co, London)