

Critical Incident Exercise

Take 30 minutes in a group to practice the following Critical Incident Technique:

Stage 1. Description of the critical incident

The story of the incident should be a detailed description of the incident, which involves the following:

- Brief details of the social, organisational and personal context and the background of the incident that you see as relevant;
- Reasons the incident is critical to you e.g. why you have chosen it; what you want to learn from it;
- Brief description of the actual incident from your own perspective-the emphasis should be on concrete description rather than analysis.

Nb. Try not to be deliberately abstract or theoretical at this stage, but to describe the incident as much from 'off the top of the head' as possible This has the potential of telling us more about your spontaneous and unexamined assumptions than a more abstract or considered account might do.

Stage 2. Analysis of the incident

The following set of questions should be used to analyse (reflect upon) the account of the incident. In this stage of the process you become the researcher, deconstructing (reflecting upon) your account or narrative in order to identify assumptions that construct your actions and notions of power. The focus is on your own actions and ways of thinking:

- What main themes or patterns emerge from the description and appear important to me? What terms, phrases or patterns of communication do I use frequently? What labels or categorisations do I apply? Is there any evidence of dichotomous thinking?
- Who are all the potential players (Individuals, groups, organisations) involved in the situation, or potentially affected by it? Where do I sit in relation to them and how do I see myself in relation to them?
- Whose perspectives are represented and whose are missing? How do I present my perspective in the story?
- What interpretations or explanations did I make? Were they all mine or was I influenced by someone else or from somewhere else or from elsewhere? Did I present them as mine? How did I represent and how did my interpretations influence the situation?
- How might I have interpreted the situation differently? How many different interpretations could I have made, and how might it have been interpreted by different players in the situation?
- What knowledge and assumptions do I imply and use in my account? What do these assumptions have to do with (for example) practice theory value and belief systems, paradigms; human behaviour; moral and ethical codes; social and political systems and change; power; gender and cultural considerations? Are they relevant and appropriate to the situation at hand?
- Where do these assumptions originate? Where do they come from? (e.g. family or cultural background? Professional training? A particular experience?)

- What roles or positions do these assumptions support? What roles or positions of mine do they support? What players stand to gain or lose from holding them, and what social and power functions does holding these assumptions perform, particularly for me? What practices, systems or structures are upheld by these assumptions?
- What holes, gaps, biases are there in the description? What perspectives are missing, distorted or devalued? What actions or assumptions of mine or others support these biases?
- What is my 'theory of power' arising from my account? Where does this come from and why have I developed it or taken it on board?

Stage 3. Creating practice theory

Having undertaken this reflective analysis of the kinds of thinking and constructions which influence our practice, we are now in a position to identify how our thinking needs to change and how our practice theory needs to be redeveloped, so that it supports our empowerment and critical ideals. The following sets of questions can assist in helping to redevelop our practice theory:

- How does what happened in my incident compare with what I intended to do, or what I assumed I was doing? Was the theory I claimed to be using different from what was implied by my actions and interpretations? Did my actions fit my theory?
- How does my experience of this situation compare with past or other experiences? What are the common themes or patterns? What aspects of this incident or situation can be applied to others of mine or my colleagues?
- How do the different types of knowledge and theory I used in this situation relate to each other?
- What further questions arise out of my theory and practice as a result of this experience and my reflection? What needs to be changed about my assumptions, theory, actions, interpretations, skills as a result of these reflections?
- What needs to be changed about my assumptions, theory, actions, interpretations, skills as a result of these reflections?
- What strategies can I use to make these changes? How do these strategies fit with my changed theories or interpretations?
- How do the main assumptions which underline my practice compare with the more formal theoretical perspectives? What do I need to change about the way I see these theories or the way I use them, as a result of my reflections?
- How would I label or categorise (or relabel or recategorise) my own theory as a result of this comparison? If I uncovered binary opposites in my story, what is the middle ground (or third or even fourth way) of constructing what was happening? Therefore what might be my version of or my terminology for the theory upon which I practice?
- What is my reformulated theory of (or assumptions about) power which has/have resulted from my reflection?
- How can I frame my own practice theory so that what I have learnt from this situation is useable in other contexts?

STOP after 30 minutes.

Discuss what the benefits were of this approach. For instance, what would have happened if the person had simply shared the incident and 30 minutes of unstructured discussion had followed.