

# Helpful Conversations

## (Part 5)

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From a newsletter series on [www.itstime.com](http://www.itstime.com)

Starting November 2014

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## CHAPTER 12:

### *Putting it All Together*

At the outset of our journey in this book, we met Tom and Sally and were privy to their conversation about Tom's 'niggle.' Since then, we have been thinking about how helpful conversations are put together and how we might develop a framework to understand, critique and assess their success or otherwise.

Let's revisit Tom's conversation with Sally to see what we now make of it.

SALLY and TOM	Notes
<p><b>SCENE:</b> <i>Meeting Room</i>  <i>Sally and Tom sitting across the table</i></p>	<p><i>This is the <b>setting</b>. It's one of 'boxes within boxes' really, because both Tom and Sally are aware that they are undertaking a practice for their training. Although the issue Tom discusses is real, there is also a sense of artificially, pressure of being observed, plus they are being video'd. With regard to their <b>role(s)</b>, they are each social workers and also fellow students, so they relate at two levels. There is a <b>dual remit</b>. Tom's primary remit is that of proving his fellow student with a scenario suitable to practice her skills on. Sally's primary remit is to demonstrate her competence in using a counseling approach. Due to their dual-role relationship, there is also an implicit remit of making the practice session as beneficial as possible to the overall goal of the training.</i></p>
<p><b>(2) SALLY:</b>    <b>Hi, Tom</b></p>	<p><i>Social greeting.</i></p>
<p>TOM                Hi, Sally</p>	<p><i>Social greeting</i></p>
<p><b>(4) SALLY</b>     <b>How are you today?</b></p>	<p><i>This still carries on in 'social mode.' It's part of the <b>macro skill</b> of 'establishing rapport.'</i></p>
<p>TOM                I'm very well, very well indeed</p>	<p><i>Settling in to the conversation and the situation</i></p>

<b>(6) SALLY</b>	<b>How are things going? OITT</b>	<i>This seems very similar to (4) yet is more bland. It shifts attention away from the social and signals that the practitioner is ready to listen to whatever Tom wishes to talk about. As a micro skill, it's an <b>Open Invitation to Talk</b>. Why and why not 'Focusing'? It's bland, open-ended, not picking up on any one topic. The choice is left to Tom.</i>
TOM	Very well, there's just a slightly little niggle I've got... As you are aware I work in the Westport office of our Department. Now I am based in Eastport and have been for 14/16 years. So, going to Westport, the people don't really know me. Uh... but it's not really related to that. It's a silly issue really. ... It's actually related to the room I am using, which is set up like an office and I get the impression that it is really an Area Manager's office, you know it's got that feel to it that I do not feel is really conducive to the role of a Counseling and Support Welfare Officer	<i>Tom now sets out the issue. He begins by giving the background.</i>
<b>(8) SALLY</b>	<b>So you say it makes you feel silly? RM/ The set-up makes you feel silly? Focusing or Deepening./</b>	<i>A very interesting practitioner response: Sally actually picks up on how the situation has affected Tom and reflects this back to him. She has chosen to focus on Tom's internal world 'makes you feel silly,' rather than the external world (e.g. the office set up). She has heard and understood what Tom said and feeds this back to him. So, technically, she is using a 'Reflection.' She is not reflecting 'feeling' because although she uses the word 'silly' there's no indication of Tom's emotion, e.g. angry, upset, embarrassed or what?</i>



*It's important to note that in English, the word 'feel' is a blanket term and does not necessarily refer to emotions. It's also not a Reflection of Point of View (RPV) because it's not about Tom's overall perspective about the external set up. His overall point of view would probably be something like: "This office set up is not congenial to my work." When Tom uses the term 'silly' he's probably describing his thinking process or the implications / meaning it has for him. The external circumstances of his work have resulted in him feeling awkward, perhaps unsure of how he should proceed, uncertain, doubtful about whether he's making mountains out of molehills... So probably, the most accurate description of this first intervention is that it is a Reflection of Meaning (RM).*

*Sally has picked up on the core message astutely and reflected it back to Tom. The second part of her intervention aims to clarify what she has not fully understood, namely what it is about the situation that makes Tom 'feel silly.'*

*So the 'theme' of the entire conversation is evident from the outset, but of course, it is not clear. Sally's next intervention seeks to clarify. It's intention is in fact that of asking the client to say more + explain further. Its wording does not limit Tom to either the external world or the internal world. In response, Tom could talk more about the office set-up or about his feelings. So at this stage, the skill could be identified as either **Focusing** (=please explore the external world further) or **Deepening** (=please explore your internal world further). It's clearly not any of the Reflections because the practitioner is not feeding anything back to the client, rather asking the client to explore further.*

TOM

No, sorry, not the set up makes me feel silly. I thought you may think I am being silly because it is a small issue. The set up makes me feel ... within the accommodation I have got in Westport makes me feel that it is too much of an office situation. Basically, to explain – in Eastport I have got a corner seating unit. People in

*Tom is quick to clarify. It's not about the external world. He carries on by talking more about his internal world and how the situation with the office has made him 'feel.'* Notice, yet again, the 'blanket' function of the word 'feel.' Much of what Tom says refers to his thoughts or the implication, significance or meaning the office situation and clients' responses to it have.

general... people sometimes come in, and although some people have had a joke about it being a sort of counseling couch and have had bit of a laugh about it, people have actually come and said this feels more of a relaxing environment. Now the situation in Westport is that I have not get that relaxing environment.

**(10) SALLY**    **So, you feel that it is too formal? RPV/**  
**The setting's too formal? Deepening/**

*An excellent succinct intervention by Sally. Note how, yet again – as above also! - Sally has condensed Tom's detailed account to the nub of the issue. She feeds it back to him. So this is definitely a Reflection. It's not a Summary because Sally is only responding to the previous utterance. A Summary usually entails putting several client statements together. So, if we agree this is a Reflection, why a **Reflection of Point of View**? Well, overall, that's precisely what Tom's view of the situation is: it's too formal. This is not a 'feeling' nor is this about personal significance or meaning. It's also more than a 'thought' because a thought would refer only to a part of the situation, such as 'it doesn't have a couch.' Points of View comprise several such thoughts and are the 'bottom line' perspective. Here, that of it being "too formal." In the second part of her intervention, Sally explores the meaning of the first. She invites the client to explain his inner world, so this is clearly **Deepening**.*

TOM That's correct. I do feel it is too formal. That is not the actual difficulty. The difficulty arises on the basis that because I know people in Eastport – I know Facilities and even get things purchased. It is so much easier for me to go and say 'Can I have this?' and generally speaking, they actually supply it, but in Westport I am not that well known and in some ways I feel I can't go and say to them "Can I have this" because it is like somehow throwing weight around "I am the new Counseling Support Office for your office – I want this...I want that.." I have seen a number of clients and I just feel that the environment is not conducive to a conversation, whether it is to do with a major issue, perhaps it's a bereavement or whether it is to do with a simple issue as giving information. I feel that the environment does not really lend itself . . . I mean I do not know how to approach it because I feel I cannot really go into Personnel and say "I want this and I want that" because all these things cost a lot of money, and I do feel that I haven't got that sort of relationship with them to try it on.

*Lovely!*

*This is what happens when client feels heard and understood. They agree and carry on telling you more.*

**(12) SALLY Can I go back to you... You feel that the setting you have in the office is too formal and you want to change things, but you don't want to come across to authoritative to your accommodation people or Personnel to get these changes to happen – so that's inhibiting you from making these changes.**  
**Summarizing.**

*This would now be a **Summary** overall (rather than one of the Reflections) because the practitioner draws together the threads from several interchanges. Sally additionally picks up on Tom's concern about being perceived as authoritative. This takes a further step into his internal world and focuses on the **person rather than the problem**. As noted earlier, she appears to be aware that the situation is making him somewhat uneasy / anxious / perhaps frustrated, but chooses to hint at that indirectly in her use of the word 'inhibiting.' That kind of 'delicacy' can be very appropriate in employee support work where there are limits to the depth that emotional issues can be taken.*

TOM	<p>Yes, perhaps it seems that way. ... I was just thinking it through. ... It's almost as though I don't like that authoritarian style in the Employee Support Officers' counseling room and perhaps I do not want to use that same authoritarian style to approach the Facilities area in case they feel I am being a bit too pushy.</p>	<p><i>It's interesting and 'telling' that of all of the many things Tom could take forward in his response, he chooses to pick up on the emotional / personal meaning aspects the situation has for him. His immediate response sounds only mildly agreeable: "Yes, perhaps it seems that way." Notice how the remainder focuses on and explores his internal world in further detail. His response consists of (59) words. Of these, the initial (6), that is 10%, are a kind of 'bridging response' to the practitioner and remainder, (53) words (= 90%) go down the road of further exploring the meaning and implications of the situation for him.</i></p> <p><i>This is lovely testament to the power of non-directive practitioner interventions. By remaining open, sensitive to the client's utterances and responding without an agenda — within a couple of minutes of conversation, the practitioner has facilitated the client to get in touch with deeper, personal issues.</i></p>
(14) SALLY	<p><b>Have you thought to feed this back through your Manager?</b></p> <p><b>Focusing</b></p>	<p><i>Oops – and sorry, dear 'Sally'... We did talk about this in detail afterwards. This is where the conversation took a different turn altogether. So glad you had this conversation, Sally, and so very grateful to you and Tom for your very kind permission that it could be used for training.</i></p> <p><i>OK, technically, what's happening here... Sally has 'switched gear' from using <b>following skills</b> and being <b>non-directive &amp; client-centered</b> to taking the initiative in the conversation and structuring it towards outcomes. It's adopted a much more managerial and 'external world problem-solving' stance.</i></p> <p><i>From the perspective of the conversation flowing naturally and organically, there is a distinct sense of a 'break.' It leaves one wondering where that would have left Tom who was well down the garden path of looking at his internal world experience...</i></p>

TOM	<p>I have spoken very briefly about it. As I said, I have raised it with the Head of Facilities saying, "Can I have this?" ... I have a fairly open rapport with him – I think he has a fairly jocular nature – and he just said "Yea, Tom, just give us the list." I don't think really it is a massive priority for them in the wider scheme of things but in my mind, it is a very key priority for me.</p>	<p><i>The difficulty with client-work is that clients tend to be 'kind' and collaborate with the practitioner. So, as practitioner, you are not likely to get any explicit protest.</i></p> <p><i>Tom also switches gear and talks mainly about practicalities (81) words in total, although there is just that slight personal note at the end: "in my mind, it is a very key priority for me" (10 words = 10%)</i></p>
(16) SALLY	<p><b>Yeah, yeah, I can see that. SD How about ... just another alternative, another option for you to consider. ... How about putting a business case through to your manager and putting in the reasons why you feel it is necessary to get these changes in your set-up and see what the response is to that? Focusing Have you thought about doing that? Focusing / Challenging</b></p>	<p><i>We begin with a mildly personal response "Yeah, yeah, I can see that," which technically would fall under <b>Self Disclosure</b>. We then move swiftly on into managerial problem-solving, identifying options &amp; strategies, goal setting, and so forth. These are presented as external world options (=Focusing) with an element of inviting the client to pick up on the options (=Challenge).</i></p>
TOM	<p>No, I have not. At the moment, perhaps a formal approach is what is required. I have just had an informal approach. It has been one of those things. It is not just the room, the more I think about it. ... The stand that we use for information and leaflets is basically a small insignificant stand at the bottom of one of the stair wells, which people don't see as most people use the elevators. So there are a number of ways I feel that I can improve the service and want to improve the service, because, as you well know, we want to do our best at the end of the day, but it is almost as though I have this block in myself that I do not want to push it and be seen as 'overstepping my position.'</p>	<p><i>As noted above – clients tend to be obliging and work with the practitioner. They're also in the 'client role,' that is focusing on their particular issue, so to that extent, they leave the direction of the conversation to the practitioner.</i></p> <p><i>We'd already considered Tom's response here in Chapter One. He picks up on the managerial approach and the suggested solution of putting forward a business case. He uses (179) words in his response. Only at the tail end and in only (28) words (= 6.4% of the total) does he express his concern, but he manages to do this in three ways over!</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>it is almost as though I have this block in myself</i></li> <li>• <i>that I do not want to push it and be seen as 'overstepping my position.'</i></li> </ul>

- (18) SALLY Uhm. Uhm. ... So let me relay this back to you again. **Signals upcoming Reflection/** You feel that you are being pushy ... demanding, maybe? **RM/** Is that what you feel? **Deepening./**
- Sally picks up his 'core message' sensitively and responds directly to it rather than to any of the earlier, more peripheral points. So it's actually a switch from the earlier 'managerial' / problem-solving approach. This is an astute and perceptive practitioner intervention. This is definitely a **Reflection**, and best fit would be a **Reflection of Meaning**. Why? Because we don't know how Tom is feeling emotionally, so it's not (RF), it's more than a thought (RT), it's not about the external world (RPV). The second part of Sally's intervention seeks clarification of the first. We're already into the internal world, so this is **Deepening**.
- TOM Yes, definitely. I think you've hit the nail on the head. Yes, it is how others will perceive me. Because, from the point of view of the clients I am seeing in Westport, I am pretty sure that they do not see it as an issue – No one has ever said to me "I do not think that this room is suitable." Things have changed. Originally, when I went down there, the room I was assigned was actually just a meeting room and I had to book it. So I was pushy into saying "I do not want this, I want a proper room " and perhaps part of the issue... well, I pushed... and they provided me with a room, and what I don't want to be saying now is - although I want it- is to be in the position of 'now you have given me a room and you've kicked somebody out and put them somewhere else,' now I am now being seen to be pushy by saying "I now want this and I want that."
- Unsurprisingly, the client's response confirms this: "...you've hit the nail on the head..." He then goes on to elaborate, as clients do when they're in the right stretch of territory.
- (20) SALLY It sounds as though this is a very important issue to you. **ARM**
- Sally is spot on here, yet again with a Reflection. She rolls the content of what Tom says back to the level of how important it is to him. So clearly we are talking about a Reflection, a Reflection of Meaning and probably an **Advanced Reflection of Meaning**, because Tom hasn't quite expressed how very important it is – Sally has placed that emphasis.

TOM	Yes.	<i>This is what happens when you get it right – the client is with you.</i>
(22) SALLY	<p>How important is it for you get something done?</p> <p><b>Deepening</b></p>	<b>Deepening.</b>
TOM	Very important.	
(24) SALLY	<p>Right, so thinking along the lines of other</p> <p><b>Alternatives... A focusing-type intervention</b></p> <p>Because as I said, things in our line of work... <b>Recapping</b> How important is it for us to make the client feel safe and secure, ummh? <b>Challenging / Deepening</b></p>	<p><i>Managerial, problem-solving approach. Throughout the importance of the issue to Tom has been explored, and this is used as a motivation to resolve the matter.</i></p> <p><i>“How important is it for us to make the client feel safe and secure, ummh?” As a communication skill, it invites Tom to think about his inner values, so to that extent is <b>Deepening</b>, but it also highlights the discrepancy between what Tom feels and has experienced and what he knows should happen... What is he going to do about it?! So, it’s a <b>challenge</b>.</i></p>
TOM	<p>It is very much part of the work at the end of the day, to make the client feel as ‘safe’ as possible, which I am very interested in... Ummh, yah. Perhaps a formal approach to the Manager...</p> <p>Perhaps I am being too hard on myself – that’s how I sometimes feel... I don’t really know. Assertiveness is a quality which we all have to learn and perhaps being a bit more assertive and saying, “Well alright, you provided me with a room, but in an ideal scenario . . . I do not know what you think about me putting a business case and I’ll be able to improve the service I offer, if you provided me with this. ... I feel I could. ...</p>	<p><i>Client happily cooperating in problem-solving mode initially, and underlying issues still coming to the surface, as in:</i></p> <p><i>“...perhaps I am being too hard on myself – that’s how I sometimes feel... I don’t really know. Assertiveness is a quality which we all have to learn and perhaps being a bit more assertive....”</i></p> <p><i>However, Tom is basically following Sally’s managerial, problem-solving ‘Business Case’ approach.</i></p>

<b>(26) SALLY</b>	<p><b>Yes, yes, and exploring the different avenues and the advantages of doing so perhaps. Have you thought about going down these lines and compiling that report?’</b>  <b>Goal-setting</b></p>	<p><i>More problem-solving and specific strategies, goal-setting</i></p>
TOM	<p>Yes, I think you are right. I might just sit down and do that and prepare something. ...</p>	<p><b>Action Plan</b></p>
<b>(28) SALLY</b>	<p><b>Well, if you would like to run it past me when you have finished, please feel free to do so. Mini-/Re-contracting</b></p>	<p><b>Re-contracting</b> <i>for next meeting.</i></p>
TOM	<p>Okay Sally. Thanks for your time</p>	<p><i>Social ending.</i></p>
<b>(30) SALLY</b>	<p><b>Okay. Bye.</b></p>	

Used with Kind Permission of 'Sally' and 'Tom.'

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

I'm aware that a lot of theoretical material has been introduced so far in this book and I thought it was important that we applied it to practice. Also to show that it's not complicated or airy-fairy, and helps to appreciate what's happening in conversations and how to improve them.

Many heartfelt thanks to my dear students, 'Sally' and 'Tom.'

I hope the journey of revisiting their conversation has been helpful.



*Task No 12*

How do you see that conversation now?