

# O.A.S.I.S.: A Solution Focused reflective team format

**Liselotte Baeijaert**

## **Introduction**

Our company, Ilfaro, was asked to do reflective teams with leaders from an international manufacturing company. The goal was to have them sharing their best practices, learning from one another and finding solutions for their issues. The managers came from different departments of the company and did not necessarily know one another. They didn't have any prior knowledge of SF. In this article I present our O.A.S.I.S. model for these reflective teams. It is inspired by the reflecting team model of Tom Andersen (1991), that was reframed by Harry Norman, Michael Hjerth and Tim Pidsley (2005).

## **What is O.A.S.I.S.?**

The O.A.S.I.S. Reflective Team is a structured process that helps participants to discover their own solutions and strengths in dealing with problems. In this way they share their treasure box of what have been good solutions in similar situations. At the end of an O.A.S.I.S. process, the case-bringer decides what inspired him most in finding his solution and what actions he wants to try first. Besides the result for their content, people practice useful leadership skills such as non-judgmental listening, appreciating, asking useful questions, being interested in resources and successes. O.A.S.I.S. is an acronym that represents the 5 stages in the facilitated conversation process: Opening, Appreciation, Suggestions, Inspiration and Stop.

Address for correspondence: Prosperdreef 1, 3001 Heverlee, Belgium

## **Participants**

We usually limit the number of participants for reflective teams to a maximum of 8. That morning, at the business centre, I welcomed five guests from different departments of the Belgian part of the company and three international managers. The three were, like their Belgian colleagues, more senior people, responsible for large sales, customer service and marketing teams in Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland.

## **Safe place for sharing what works**

In our introduction we always find it important to create a safe and inviting environment where people feel welcome and curious about what is to come. Qualitative reflection time has become extremely scarce in most of the organisations where we work. Meetings must be quick, efficient, dealing mostly with operations, issues and information and there is a general lack of good connection time. This is particularly true in this manufacturing organisation where there has been amazing growth in the last couple of years. We tell the participants that they are valuable experts in their company and that only they know what is working in their environment, with clients, staff, suppliers . . . The things they are learning on the way, their reflections, experiences, insights etc., are all valuable and important and it would be a shame if they weren't shared more often and frequently.

## **The big picture of the day**

- Introduction.
- Getting to know each other.
- Warming up in small groups.
- A challenge for the future.
- Choosing the cases.
- Background and stages of O.A.S.I.S.
- Case 1, Break, Case 2.
- Closing.

## **Getting to know each other**

Participants are invited to introduce themselves and to share something that is keeping them busy professionally. I often start, as a way of providing an example, and share my concern about the high pressure in companies, the often mechanistic approach to people and the need for more meaningful conversations. When this group shared their concerns, it became obvious that people were really interested in each other and in each other's situations and issues. In this first round, we get a first impression of the cases that will be presented and what is important for whom. We often see that several issues have similar ingredients and that this could reveal important information about the organisation as a whole.

## **Warming up in small groups: sharing successes**

To ensure that they feel competent before we start the O.A.S.I.S., they break up into small groups (3 or 4). We engender curiosity about the process, telling them that what we do is quite different from what is normally done in work meetings. In this first warmup exercise, we don't talk randomly or give each other advice but instead we just listen and act as journalists who know nothing and want to know everything about how people look back upon their success. Participants are asked to interview one another about a recent success: something that was not easy but that they managed to do. The interviewer is asked to be almost shamelessly curious about all the aspects of the success. We give them some examples of useful questions:

- How did you do this?
- What happened exactly?
- How did you notice you were successful?
- How did others notice?
- What was the effect of what you did?
- How did you prepare for this?
- What else was helpful?

- What was your biggest learning?
- What would you do again next time?

After the interviews I asked them what the effect was of being interviewed and they answered that it made them feel good, happier than before the conversation, that they felt competent and successful and would like to have this kind of challenge again. Someone told me that, as an interviewer, he started feeling energised and excited just by listening to the story of the other person. They also mentioned that it was quite interesting to hear what was going on in other parts of the company and to recognise the struggle and discover the thoughts and actions of their colleagues.

Then they were asked to give feedback on what they had just heard that was particularly outstanding in the approach of their interviewee. I noticed that when doing this the atmosphere in the room became quite cheerful. They were smiling and the conversations and interactions became even more vivid and heartfelt. We talked about the importance of being concrete and subtle when giving appreciative feedback and about the timing, situation and art of giving useful compliments.

I was watching the three German men – they happened to be in a subgroup since they were the only non Dutch speakers – and I noticed that there was a kind of uneasiness in the way they were interacting during the exercise. They also mentioned it in the feedback, that it felt a bit awkward to ask each other questions. I imagined how they had been driving all the way to Belgium, talking about personal things, laughing, having fun and how indeed it could perhaps be awkward now for them to formally interview each other about successes. So I suggested mixing the groups and I could see it was easier and more natural to interview people they didn't know so well.

## A challenge for the future

The second round in the new subgroups was about the challenges in the future. This time the interviewer has to be curious about the challenges or difficulties someone is facing. We show them how they can interview each other with the question:

*“So, John, what is on your plate now that you find difficult, you are stuck with and that you really don’t look forward to or that perhaps even worries you.”*

We elicit this “problem talk” so the interviewer can practise listening to an issue or a problem in an SF way: “When someone is talking about a problem, you can always use your appreciative ears”. It means that while you are listening to the problem, you not only show understanding for the problem but you try to imagine what the *wish* behind it is. It’s like the two sides of a coin. While the one side is showing the problem, the other side is showing the wish. As a listener you are especially curious about the other side of the coin! And you focus on all the qualities you hear in your partner’s story: what he has tried already, what and who is important for him, how effectively he has been thinking about the issue . . . Appreciative listening is very different from affirming the problem (being sucked into the problem thoughts, showing that you have this problem too . . . etc.) which is not very useful in a reflective team. We explicitly ask them not to give advice or an explanation of the problem but try instead to find words for what is wanted.

While they were talking, I noticed that although they really tried to remain in interview mode, it was very difficult to stay away from giving advice or being interested in the problem. I made a little joke after the exercise and asked them who had succeeded in bringing in a little piece of advice anyway. They all laughed, because most of them had, and I could tell them it is normal to do this and that they will face the challenge of keeping their advice to the very end of the reflective team.

## **Choosing the cases**

Now the groups chose one of the challenging cases from part 2 in each subgroup. The criteria to pick the case were that it was a case that other people recognised, a case that was important or urgent and/or a case that was related to what one or more people had talked about in the opening round that was keeping them busy. We had time for one or two cases, depending on the speed of our reflective team and the complexity of the case. In all the reflective teams done at the company, only once did we spend the rest of the morning on one case.

## **Background and stages of O.A.S.I.S.**

Usually we ask them what associations they have with the word “oasis” and apart from one person who said “30 stinking camels”, people talk about refreshment, rest, time, something to look forward to, holidays, food . . . That’s what we aim for in each O.A.S.I.S. We sit in a circle focusing on the “oasis feeling” of the person who brings the case. This means that we ask questions that make him feel competent, focused, creative, confident. We make him ready for the journey ahead, aware of everything that is working well already and everything from the past that is useful.

We use a koosh ball to indicate who has the floor. The one who holds it knows that he will not be interrupted and can talk as long as he judges to be relevant for the process. This means that each participant can ask a couple of questions and engage in a short coaching moment with the case-bringer.

## **O. for Opening**

In the opening round, the case-bringer describes his case briefly (2 mins), telling not too much and yet enough so we can ask useful questions. The participants then pass the ball and in turn ask a couple of questions. There are two kinds of good questions: the context questions: asking more details

about the case (who, what, when, . . .) or SF questions. The participants who are not familiar with these questions now get a list of examples of good SF questions. Two kinds of questions are not allowed: suggestive questions, and why questions. People quickly understand why these are not allowed when we remind them of the oasis feeling.

### **A. for Appreciation**

In the appreciation round we ask the case-bringer to take a rest and mentally move to the oasis, in an (imagined) hammock under the leaves of a palm tree. He hears some people talking about him, but the sounds come from far away and he doesn't have to react or reply. The team now shares what they appreciated in the story of the case-bringer. Maybe something he did well, or something someone else is contributing to the solution. In fact everything heard that is working in the direction of what is wanted can be mentioned. As a facilitator I write down what is said and give it to the case-bringer so he can read it again.

### **S. for Suggestions**

The case-bringer can stay a little longer in his hammock but now takes a pen to note down the good ideas that come to mind while he is listening to what is said in the group. Again he doesn't need to engage in a conversation with the team. The ball goes around in the team and now everyone can give advice, suggestions, reflections, a story, a quote, . . . anything that can be useful for taking a small step forward by the case-bringer.

### **I. for Inspiration**

The case-bringer now leaves his hammock and comes back to the group. He thanks the group and talks about what was most inspiring and about the useful ideas he has recognised. These ideas may come from the group or from his own thinking.

## **S. for Stop**

We firmly ask the participants to stop talking about the case after this meeting, unless the case-bringer talks about it later. We don't want someone to be haunted by his case or have others talking about it to third parties. This is a highly confidential process since people might talk about sensitive topics and other people.

## **Conclusion: Simple process, immediate results**

What I find so exciting in the process is that SF can make a big difference in such a short time and can be practised and appreciated right away by everyone. As the people walked into the room a bit weary and winter-tired, having a lot of work on their plate, not really knowing what to expect, I was in joyful anticipation, offering them this special space for qualitative interactions. They didn't know a thing about SF and yet, by the end of that morning, they were actually coaching each other in an SF way. They managed to analyse their mutual successes, give useful appreciative feedback, and ask each other powerful SF coaching questions. They left the room reporting that they felt completely energised, happy to have contributed and more connected to the other people in their company.

**Liselotte Baeijaert** is co-owner of Ilfaro ([www.ilfaro.be](http://www.ilfaro.be)), a Belgian-based network of SF consulting facilitators. Together with Anton Stellamans, she published a book on resilience: *Resilient People, Resilient Teams*.  
[Liselotte.Baeijaert@ilfaro.be](mailto:Liselotte.Baeijaert@ilfaro.be)

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