

Cracking Questions: To help you *really* improve productivity

Jon Harvey

The Choir Press, 2016, 106 pages, ISBN 978-1910864319, £12.50 paperback (Kindle edition available)

Review by Mark McKergow

This is not strictly a book about Solution-Focused work – but it will appeal and be useful to any SF practitioner working in the real world of organisational change. I am not normally a huge fan of books of questions. In SF work the basic questions are more like serves in tennis, ways to start a piece of conversation which will allow consultant and client to co-construct something – so the actual question is simply part of the equation. However, in this excellent little book Jon Harvey proposes a series of 24 questions which will resonate with consultant and client alike.

Harvey begins with a very welcome debunking of the idea of process mapping – taking a detailed look at what is happening now in a work process or activity. The idea that we don't need to understand what happens NOW in order to move towards what we want in the future is central to SF work, and Harvey's crisp dismissal of all but a brief look at the present will strike a major chord with the readers of this journal. Reasons why this expensive and time-consuming process continues to appeal include: that we've been trained to do it; it looks like something valuable; it allows a lot of focus on detail to those who find it comfortable; and it makes a lot of money for consultants!

Harvey's rejection of process mapping includes 'customer journey' mapping – where the process is mapped from the customer's perspective. Harvey says (rightly) that this is a pretence of customer involvement, as it requires no input from actual customers. The whole effort to map existing processes

in detail depletes energy and creates an impression of certainty and accuracy which is not justified. This move in mindset from a static world (where things stay the same until we change them, a position beloved of technocratic bully-boy consultants) to one where things are always in flux, small changes matter and the way we engage with people makes a huge difference is reflected admirably in this short but key opening section.

Each of Harvey's 24 questions follows, with examples of how it might be used. These are blissfully short – a page or two for each question. For example, question nine asks 'Could some parts of the process be done at the same time?' This is followed by a story of Harvey working with the Consumer's Association, who were finding that product research for their magazine *Which* was taking so long that the best buy products were out of stock by the time the report appeared! The way forward was to adjust parts of the process to run in parallel – rather like boiling the potatoes at the same time as roasting the meat. This sounds obvious of course, but when something has been done the same way for years or even decades, it can seem to attain super-hero powers of invincibility.

Each of Harvey's questions is like a doorway – an invitation to peer into an aspect of the situation at hand which may have gone unchallenged or un-noticed, but which may lead to new angles and helpful realisations for all concerned. Harvey's decades of experience in working with organisations at a process level shines through; each question comes with commentary and often a story about how it was helpful in a real-life situation. The book concludes with a short section of questions to help in the leadership of change processes and, interestingly, how to decide when you've changed things enough. This last is a key SF question too – what would be enough to get things moving again, so that we don't have to worry about it right now? We are also treated to a fascinating collection of leadership book recommendations from a variety of people, ranging from organisational leaders to Stephen Fry (who doesn't recommend any leadership books – "they're all absolute drivel").

The short and crisp nature of this book will appeal to those who are keen to get along and get things moving, as opposed to spending ages pondering on the side lines. I can imagine pulling it off my bookshelf to flip through in search of a new angle on a knotty situation. These are questions which, while they may not crack the situation on their own, may at least help to see chinks of light in the darkness.