

BENEFITS OF FOCUSING AND OTHER REFLECTIVE PRACTICES IN THE WORKPLACE

Charles F. Herr, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

I worked as a psychologist at a municipal outpatient mental health clinic for 18 years. For most of those years I was the Director of Psychological Services. After 9/11/2001, the clinic, which serves a population directly affected by the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, received a grant to train the staff in various modalities of treatment for trauma, including a training module in Focusing by Lynn Preston. That training was the beginning of my serious engagement with Focusing. (Until then I had only known of Focusing by experimenting on my own with the processes described in Gendlin's book, *Focusing*.) A social worker and I followed Lynn Preston's recommendation to form a Focusing partnership that continued over several years — but I don't recall anyone else in the training doing so. Years later some partnerships were formed under my influence; I describe those below. I studied further with Ann Weiser Cornell, and eventually enrolled in the Focusing Institute's training in Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy.

During the Focusing Certification Weeklong in 2008, we were asked to develop a project that we wanted to carry forward into the world. Below is how I formulated my project at the end of the weeklong:

I would like the respectful way that we connect when we are Focusing together to inform the way people relate to each other generally. If that were to happen, it would transform our social structures and would promote peaceful resolution of world conflicts. I found, in a very deep way my need for safety and connection, and my immediate project is to generate this safety and connection in my workplace. I also came to appreciate in a new way how important respect is to creating understanding. A step that I imagine taking, is using Clearing a Space with the staff at work to discover together, "What is in the way of safety?"

For many years since that time, I tried, in my role as Director of Psychology and Director of Internship Training at the clinic, to introduce Focusing — and Nonviolent Communication — into our workplace. I engaged in a number of conversations with Eugene Gendlin about how it might be possible to create a model for a Focusing-oriented organization.

MY EFFORTS TO INTRODUCE MINDFULNESS AND FOCUSING INTO THE WORKPLACE

A history and assessment of my efforts to introduce Focusing, both as a practice for individuals and as a practice that guided how we worked together, would take another article. Briefly, I guided interested staff through a Focusing process, I introduced it into my supervision, and I attempted to introduce a Focusing attitude into how meetings were conducted, allowing a safe and respectful space for all to speak (in Gendlin's words, letting people speak their second and third sentences!) — all with varying degrees of success and failure.

Since I retired from my position in August 2013, I have maintained a relationship with the staff there who have become Focusers to various degrees. I have a weekly Focusing partnership with one psychologist at the clinic, with whom I began Focusing years ago when we were both at the clinic. He has completed four levels of training in Inner Relationship Focusing. We co-taught courses for trainees in experiential therapy and continue to teach an introduction to Focusing for externs.

In addition I have maintained some less frequent Focusing partnerships with current and former staff at the clinic. While at the clinic, I started monthly 'Focusing lunches' for anyone interested in Focusing, regardless of how much they knew about it. These lunches have continued since I left the clinic, and I continue to attend them. I have ongoing discussions with one administrator, whom I introduced to Focusing and NVC, and who values both practices highly.

Before I became seriously engaged with Focusing, I had an interest in meditation and mindfulness that began in my late adolescence. I brought this interest into the clinic by inviting staff for a weekly half hour meditation practice on Thursdays during lunch. These sessions often involved listening together to recordings of guided meditation created by Jon Kabat-Zinn, but participants shared with each other practices that they enjoy. Later I became part of a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) team. Mindfulness is a central concept in DBT and mindfulness exercises are done at the beginning of every weekly DBT Consultation Team meeting. Many staff members engage in mindfulness practices, including yoga and relaxation, in addition to Focusing — and a number of them are trained in hypnosis and sometimes combine it with Focusing.

After retiring from the clinic, I interviewed staff to learn more about how they used these various practices in the workplace. I thought that, since I was no longer their "boss", they might speak to me more freely. To be more inclusive, I decided not to limit myself to Focusing, and put Focusing under a larger umbrella that I called "Reflective Practices" (RPs). In the course of my interviews, I identified three areas in which RPs appeared to be helpful: managing stress, dealing effectively with interpersonal difficulties, and fostering organizational creativity, i.e., finding new strategies to meet the needs of the organization, the staff, and clients.

Based on interviews with ten staff members of the clinic's Department of Behavioral Health, who engage in Reflective Practices, such as Mindfulness, meditation, Focusing, breathing, relaxation, and yoga, I provide here a summary of my findings:

1) Pausing when one is stirred up leads to more effective and creative responses and allows for new possibilities for relating and acting.

2) It is important to choose carefully with whom to be open. (It is not safe to Focus with everyone, and pausing is sometimes misunderstood as weakness or indecisiveness.)

3) The direction that Focusing and other RPs take is sometimes not predictable in advance. RPs can lead to initiating collaborative efforts for constructive change and to discovering more adaptive or effective practices on a personal and professional level. They can improve relationships with clients in therapy. And they can lead people to leave a situation or an organization that is experienced as life-blocking or as not in line with deep life purpose and values. Sometimes people discover passions that they were unaware of and branch onto new paths.

There is a huge uncharted territory regarding how relationships at work can become truly collaborative and whether RPs alone (including Focusing) are sufficient to bring about that change.

Three areas in particular were examined:

1) Stress: All interviewees agreed that RPs help with managing stress by increasing self-awareness and promoting more centeredness in self, more groundedness, and more clarity.

2) Interpersonal Conflict: All interviewees agreed that pausing, when they are feeling reactive or stirred-up, helps to find solutions to interpersonal difficulties. Several mentioned that taking time when in a conflict to become aware of one's own needs and the needs of the other person — or seeing the issue from the other person's point of view as well as one's own — helps to establish a compassionate connection.

For example, our staff became embroiled in a divisive conflict when, at the end of October 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City, shutting down transportation and electrical power in lower Manhattan (where the clinic is) for nearly a week. The hospital stayed open for inpatients and outpatients using generators. Many staff who live outside of Manhattan were unable to come in, but others such as myself, were able to walk to work — I live 2 miles away — through the inclement weather. One psychiatrist heroically took hours to make it in from a suburb north of New York City.

A staff controversy arose about the fairness of the hospital's policy not to pay staff who had not come in. Was it fair not to pay those who couldn't make it in — or who decided it would not be worth the effort? Was it fair to those who did make it in through inclement weather, with no transportation, and who worked the day without heat, cellphone service, and running water? Unresolved arguments broke about among our clinic's staff.

Another staff person with whom I had Focused for some years and I had a fairly heated exchange at a staff meeting: She thought it was unfair to penalize those who could not — or

decided not — to come in because of the hurricane’s extraordinary circumstances; I thought it was not fair to those who did make it in to have their extraordinary efforts compensated in the same way as those who stayed home. After the meeting, we sat down and talked through our feelings, and I was better able to see her point of view. We didn’t arrive at a solution, but harmony and mutual respect were established. I think the Focusing connection that we previously had helped a lot.

On the other hand, another staff person continued to be very angry at what he interpreted as the uncaring attitude of top hospital administrators during Sandy. I knew some of his views were based on misinformation, but he was not open to hearing me, and perhaps I did not empathize sufficiently with his needs. I tried to speak with him as well, but we were not able to arrive at an understanding connection. My sense is that over the course of a work relationship of several years, we remained connected on a relatively cognitive level and did not establish a deeper felt sense connection. Thus, I conclude that NVC and Focusing, or at least my own limited skills with these practices, were not sufficient to bridge all discord. On the other hand, in some cases these tools did help ease stalemates.

3) **Organizational creativity:** Some interviewees described instances where new collaborative approaches were found by taking time to re-examine the current practices and allow new possibilities or ideas to emerge. Sometimes, however, efforts to find new creative solutions were constrained by concerns that new methods might interfere with certain organizational imperatives/goals.

Some interviewees noted that an important element in promoting organizational creativity in meetings is that the person leading the meeting to provide space (i.e., pauses, quiet moments) for participants to connect to their feelings and better formulate their thoughts. Also, the ability of the leader of the group to listen non-defensively and reflect the main points of participants did promote organizational creativity. The practice of listening in this way, with attention, is an integral part of Focusing.

Obstacles to RPs:

Interviewees reported that the heavy workload and organizational pressure to ‘produce’ can make it hard to remember to take even brief moments during the day to center oneself. Also, they mentioned the problem that RP’s are not scheduled into the structure of work, except in DBT Consultation Meetings. Another obstacle was the lack of professional reward for their RP practice.

What Focusing shares with other RPs and how it differs.

All RPs share some form of pausing as part of the practice: In its most basic form pausing involves taking the time to observe or notice feelings, thoughts, body processes and sensations, such as breathing. All RPs promote a kind of “observational space” in which a greater sense of centeredness or groundedness can grow. But, in addition to observing, Focusing involves relating and learning to listen to our *felt body sense* of situations. Inviting and allowing of a holistic body sense of a situation to form is more than attending to a simple

feeling like sadness or anger. The felt sense has an intricacy to it from which new steps and possibilities can emerge.

Focusing Workplace Partnerships

Focusing, in contrast to most other RPs, is frequently done in partnerships with one person, who is speaking or sitting quietly, and attending to their felt sense of a situation — with another person listening attentively without giving advice or opinions. It is hard at work to find space for such partnerships.

However, Focusing partnerships were, and continue to be, a very important part of my experience at the clinic. I introduced Focusing in my supervision of interns, always respecting whether they wanted to engage with me in that way. Several of these supervisory relationships graduated into Focusing partnerships, usually intermittently, but occasionally more regularly. With some staff, I introduced what I called “Brother, can you spare a time.” For example, another staff person and I would agree that if either of us were upset by something, we could ask for five minutes. During that time, usually little or nothing was said about the content or cause of the upset; often the five minutes would be largely silent. The silent presence of another person, as one spent time with the felt sense of what was upsetting, could be enormously helpful. In this way, I not only received and gave support, I also modeled and taught *sensing inwardly* and *keeping company* with something inside. You could say that we became “empathy medics,” people on the job who knew how to provide empathy to stressed and distressed co-workers.

I read Kye Nelson’s very helpful description of how to create Focusing partnerships at work, (http://www.focusing.org/partnership/partner_info/work_partnerships.html) and passed the article on to several coworkers, some of whom agreed to form such partnerships.

I was not the only one to form such partnerships. I know of at least three other such partnerships. In one case, I coached former supervisees in how to be Focusing partners with each other. They became a very important source of support for each other in handling job stress and formed a very important bond.

These partnerships served as a place and space, where the partners could spend 10 to 20 minutes with an unclear or stuck issue and gain greater clarity, ease, and often a concrete step would occur to them that would help their situation. The kinds of issues that often came up included balancing work pressures with family life and other responsibilities, such as coping with despair about situations that felt intractable, interpersonal difficulties at work, countertransference reactions with clients, and therapies that felt stuck or unproductive. Consequently, they would feel better able to be present and available with a client in the next session. Frequently after Focusing, people would gain a better understanding of what was troubling them, and feel lighter and freer afterwards, and sometimes even have new ideas about how to deal with the situation.

While Director of Psychology, I tried to support and foster Focusing partnerships by distributing a description of the possible benefits, asking psychology staff to rate their interest on a Likert scale. There was some expressed interest, but little of that resulted in

actual partnerships. Some psychology externs, who were under less time pressure, formed fruitful Focusing partnerships with my coaching.

Where did we find time for such partnerships? Did they not take time away from work activities, such seeing clients or doing documentation? The pressures of work are, in fact, the main factor making Focusing work partnerships hard to maintain. When I now Focus with my ongoing partner, we do our practice during his lunch hour. He finds that taking some quiet Focusing-time both supportive and nurturing and does not mind devoting part of his lunchtime for this purpose. Others want their full lunch hour and choose to find other times to Focus. Almost all staff members work through part of their lunchtime occasionally, or work late and rarely take the breaks allowed by their union contract. Since Focusing does not normally involve more than a half hour total a week, the process hardly interferes with “stats,” i.e., the number of billable encounter-hours with clients, in a day or a week.

As the Director of Psychology, I observed that the psychologists who had Focusing partners invariably had among the highest encounter rates — the largest number of monthly patient visits — in the department. Because the small amount of time spent in Focusing helped me to manage stress, gain clarity, find more effective ways to work, and improved the quality of my therapeutic relationships, and I often worked an extra hour or two several days a week, I did not feel that I was taking away “company time” to Focus.

My Methods

A word is in order here about my methods. I made no attempt to do my interviews in a traditionally scientific manner, and I make no claim to rigor in that sense.

I was not a spectator observing the situation from the outside. All the interviewees knew me, and all had had the experience of working under my directorship when I was Director of Psychological Services. I was very much part of the situation I was studying, and I have continued a relationship with many of the interviewees. I was myself one of the interviewees.

Rather than have a single set of questions for all interviewees, I sat with my “thinking partner” before interviewing a participant, and allowed my felt sense to guide me in forming the questions that I wanted to ask that person. When I interviewed an individual, I sometimes started with one of those questions, or returned later to one of my preformed questions, but I did not hold rigidly to the questions, preferring for the most part to let the interview follow its own course. A more precise word than ‘interview’ for my meetings with the participants would be ‘dialogue’ around a set of questions or concerns. I did not tape the interviews, preferring to take notes, because I thought that notes would lead to a more relaxed interchange.

My stance was not one of a neutral, detached researcher. Although I was very committed to maintaining an open, respectful attitude toward the participants’ views and their experiences, I was aware that, like the Elton Mayo experiments in the Hawthorne plants, my interviews were themselves a kind of intervention, stimulating a thinking and experiencing process about the topics addressed.

I also solicited the active engagement of participants by giving them a summary of my findings and requesting their feedback.

CONCLUSION

I have provided here a brief account of my attempts to introduce Focusing — and NVC — into a workplace of which I was an integral part for many years. These efforts were recognized and honored. I received an award for clinical excellence for introducing NVC as a method for working with “difficult patients” (which would be more appropriately referred to from an NVC perspective as patients whom we found difficult to work with) and, when a much loved Director of Social Work died of cancer, the Director of the Behavioral Health Department invited me to lead a Focusing attunement at the beginning of a Memorial Service for her.

However, my attempts fell short of the vision that Gendlin and I had for creating a model of a Focusing-Oriented Organization. A set of Focusing organizational principles that I developed and shared with staff met with some resistance, primarily because a number of the staff did not take to Focusing, or perhaps because Focusing is a practice that implies a vulnerability that does not feel safe for many in a workplace. Focusing was never adopted by the organization as a whole and my attempts to introduce the process met ambivalence that took the form of a combination of largely friendly teasing and appreciation.

I consider this experiment to be part of a larger project to be shared by others who are engaged in various forms of Community Wellness Focusing. All of us seek to discover ways in which Focusing can enter into the life of communities and organizations and transform them into more humane places. We are working to ultimately create a deep change in society so that various forms of coercive relationships (power over) can turn into communities of individuals working together (power with), enhancing the quality of living for each person in the organization and the people that organization serves.

Charles F. Herr, Ph.D. is clinical psychologist with a private practice in New York City. In addition to being Focusing Oriented Psychotherapist, he is a graduate from the William Alanson White Institute’s Program in Psychoanalysis. He has received intensive training in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and Nonviolent Communication. He is interested in how Focusing and Nonviolent Communication can be integrated into efforts to create a society where every person is supported to develop freely in the context of caring community. He can be reached at: Email: cf83@tc.columbia.edu Phone: 917-714-2348.