Conversation management and use of the contract tool in consultation, supervision and coaching

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1. The professional helper
2. The participants and the communication triangle
3. The conversation contract
4. Contract management
5. Process management
6. Content management
7. Concluding remarks

This is a working paper for practical use. Its primary target group is people who train themselves or others as consultants, supervisors or coaches, or who perform these roles in practice. However, it is also relevant for practitioners in general, e.g. advisors, counsellors, mediators, lawyers, doctors, mentors, process-oriented adult educators, chairmen of various kinds of meetings, personnel responsible for projects, and managers in general. The text relates to the ongoing developmental work and action research I have carried out since the 1980s, the first many years of which were in collaboration with Søren Willert (cf. the reference list).

In section 1, consultation, supervision and coaching are defined as “ideal types”, i.e. by identifying the pure forms – keeping in mind that there is no consensus about how to define these activities. The pure forms are rarely found in the real world, which is more ambiguous and dominated by hybrids. Role combinations and role shifts can be managed

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1 In 1967, I wrote a first version of this working paper (in Danish) for a social worker course on “The conversation as a tool in the activation process”. In 2002, I made minor corrections and for several years this 9 page long version in Danish has been distributed and used in a variety of contexts. More recently, I worked on an expansion, integrating certain parts of two later publications: Madsen & Mærsk 2005 and Madsen et al. 2010. This was known to Sus Desirée Thomsen from AS3 Companies A/S. In August 2011 she took the initiative to produce a translation into English. During this process, with extensive assistance from her translator, I rewrote the text once more. In January 2012, I added corrections and a couple of new footnotes + references.
more or less successfully. The professional contract is one of the tools for establishing role clarity. However, in the present paper I do not deal with this particular application of the contract tool, but rather with the contract as a tool for conversation management. In addition, I review various forms of process and content management during the conversation.

1. The professional helper

Consultant, supervisor and coach are examples of professional helper roles. Let us examine a few definitions. Since the 1980s, Søren Willert and I have used our own formulation of the consultant role (see Willert & Madsen 1996; Madsen 2006):

A consultant provides assistance to qualify a client’s or a client system’s own clarification and problem solving. The client requests the consultant’s help and delegates limited areas of responsibility to her. As an adult participant, the client maintains full control over how and how long the consultant is involved, the goals of her work, and whether and how her suggestions are to be utilised. Conversely, the consultant is free to negotiate and ultimately say Yes or No. In short, the relationship is voluntary and contractual.

Why adult? First, because the field we are dealing with here is literally about adults. Second, “adult” in the sense of being able to make decisions for oneself; we are far from areas of the social sector, where clients and citizens are considered unable to decide or care for themselves.

There are many variations within this broad consultant concept. For example, an expert consultant is called on to assess selected aspects of the client’s reality and to propose diagnoses, strategies or concrete actions. Or the expert consultant shares her professional knowledge in the hope that it is relevant for the client. The expert’s authority is rooted in personal expertise regarding specific content areas. Conversely, a process consultant provides support with the client’s own clarification, problem solving or development process. Her authority is rooted in personal expertise regarding the type of processes, e.g. conversation processes that can qualify the client’s self-understanding and self-help. The expert and process roles may easily be combined.

Furthermore, there is a difference between internal and external consultants. When an internal consultant is used by colleagues located in the same organization, it may be difficult to live up to the ideal requirement of voluntariness. The helper’s embedment in the system – in any system - is generally an important factor.

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2In the present context, ‘management’ is a translation of the Danish ‘styring’, e.g. ‘samtalestyring’ and ‘kontraktstyring’.
Yet another variation of the consultant role is the *supervisor*, whose support has an educational aim: using selected examples from her own practice, the client (the supervisee) must develop personal insight about her professionalism, work role and problem solving. In other words, *learn* something. Here is the definition Søren Willert and I set out many years ago:

> “Supervision is a contract-managed and educationally oriented conversation, during which the supervisee has the opportunity to reflect over and explore work-related issues in order to extract learning about her professional and personal ways of relating” (Madsen & Willert 1992:59).

The long-term aim of supervision is different from certain other forms of consultation whose sole aim is immediate clarification and problem solving. Otherwise, this definition fits nicely under the umbrella of the consultant definition above. A supervisor will often combine her expert and process expertise.

There are other views of what supervision is. Not all of these require that the client has full authority over the goals of the conversation, and some do not only view the supervisor as a mere helper to the client, but also as a professional controlling body. For example, a supervisor can be appointed by management, or the manager can act as supervisor herself. I myself have practiced this form in relation to my trainees, and in such cases the relationship is not solely contractual (see Keiser & Lund 1986; Madsen & Willert 1992; Willert & Madsen 1996).

A special variant is *peer supervision*. Here, colleagues – in principle, laymen in the art of supervision – with some degree of external professional support help each other to gain insight into their personal and professional competencies. They do this by using forms of conversation that resemble the professional helper’s (see Andersen & Weiss 1994; Willert 1993; Hermansen et al. 2004 call it *intervision*). I have personally expanded this type of activity to *peer reflection* in the broader sense of the term (Madsen & Mærsk 2005).

There is no consensus on what meaning the term *coach* should embody. Hawkins & Smith (2006) list ten different definitions, all of which emphasize performance improvement as well as personal development. The following definition is borrowed from a Danish publication on leadership-based coaching:

> “Coaching is a form of conversation in which the coach inspires the other to reflect over and learn from his experiences and develop possible actions and abilities to achieve goals, solve problems and tackle challenges” (Søholm et al. 2006: 67).

Thus, coaching may be defined as a variant of both consultation and supervision that involves goal- and action-oriented work. But the latter definition says nothing about
voluntariness! The authors want to operate with a definition that accommodates situations in which a leader or manager coaches employees. Such conversations are not necessarily voluntary and contractual, and it is not the client’s (the coachee’s) prerogative alone to chose the topic of the conversation. Other coaching definitions lie closer to consultation and supervision (see Alrø et al. 2011; Hawkins & Smith 2006; Nørlem 2009; Rogers 2004; Stelter et al. 2002).

2. The participants and the communication triangle

In section 2, I examine the conversation between two parties: the professional helper and the helper’s client. The word “client” is used as a common term for the party being helped by a helper – whether it be consultation, supervision or coaching or, for that matter, therapy, counselling or legal advice. The client may be an individual or a plurality of individuals – a client system.

A professional helping conversation is by definition asymmetrical: one party is to help the other and not vice versa. In such cases, the helper is responsible for managing the conversation and she is responsible for involving the other party in the assessments as well.

Two parties, A and B, that communicate on a Common Third (C), form a triangle – the communication triangle (Madsen 1985, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2011). The horizontal line between A and B represents their mutual relationship, the diagonal lines represent their respective perspectives on and relations to the content of the conversation (C). A conversation is a verbally-dominated form of communication in which A and B exchange views and perspectives on C. The fact that a lot of other things occur parallel to this content-related communication, and that the C parameter may turn out not to be shared at all, is quite another story.

Figure 1: The communication triangle

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3 An important factor is the client’s own clients, partners, colleagues, employees, etc. The helper has an ethical responsibility to these indirect clients (Schein 1999).
Beware of the muddy we, as I call it when the helper says “we” but actually should speak in terms of I and You. It is often much more precise to refer to either your own or the other person’s position and perspective in the communication triangle, i.e. to separate I- and You-messages. The participants’ perspectives on C are always different and so-called perspective awareness is a powerful tool for the helper.

An important distinction below is that of content and process. The conversation content is what is being talked about, the common third in the communication triangle. The conversation process is the way of talking, including nonverbal communication and cues from the context, the perspectives from which communication takes place, the phases and the progress. The professional party has, at minimum, responsibility for managing the process, while it is more complicated to determine whether and when this responsibility also entails managing the content; see sections 5 and 6.

3. The conversation contract

Professional contracts may relate to many different kinds of activity. In the present context, I focus on the contract as a conversation tool for the professional helper. As with all other interesting terms within the humanities and social sciences, there are many definitions as to this concept. My definition goes as follows:

A conversation contract is an alignment or agreement between the parties that specifies the conversation’s ends and means, framework, resources and role relationship. The contract aligns the parties and ensures that their respective expectations do not turn out to be divergent too late in the process. The most important element is the goal, understood as the agreed movement. This is the content contract. In addition, the helper may employ ongoing process contracts. A contract is either implicit (silently understood) or explicit (clearly formulated), and it may be oral as well as written.

Given that the contract is an agreement, both parties must be able to sign it, literally or figuratively, and do so voluntarily. In other words, both sides must say Yes. Furthermore,

4 Perspective awareness is one of the dialogical ways of relating (in Danish: forholdemåder) suggested by Søren Willert and myself. Other important tools are curiosity = disinterested interest, and transparency (see Madsen & Willert 1993; Madsen 2006).

5 I have dealt with this contract concept in most of my publications, see especially Willert & Madsen 1996. Other relevant sources on professional contracts and contracting within the helping professions are and are Alrø & Kristensen 1998; Alrø et al. 2011; Haslebo. & Nielsen 1997; Hawkins & Shohet 1989, Hawkins & Smith 2006; Lennér-Axelson & Thylefors 1998; Moltke & Molly 2009; Stelter et al. 2002; Søholm et al. 2006;Wengel 2005.
each of the participants must be able to give suggestions about what should and should not be included in the contract. And both should ideally have veto powers. Therefore, I speak of the agreed movement.

Why movement? Because the conversation must facilitate some kind of mental movement on the part of the client, i.e. a movement in relation to the C in the communication triangle. This word covers a wide range of the changes and developments that a helping conversation aims to facilitate: emotional and attitudinal changes, changes in understanding, clarification, the pinning down of goals, plans and decisions, as well as learning. The rationale for a professional helping conversation is that the movement must be brought forth by the client, although facilitated by the helper. This does not exclude a movement in the helper as a result of the conversation, e.g. that she leaves wiser than before, but this is not a necessary condition, nor a defining parameter.

It is often a good idea for the helper to begin by enquiring about the client’s desired movement. In professional helping relationships, it is crucial that the client in this way gains ownership of what is to occur in the course of the conversation.

For many reasons it is important that the professional party can contribute input to the contract negotiation. The way in which the client formulates her desired movement may be a part of the problem, i.e. the formulation reflects a non-constructive understanding of the subject matter. Or the desired movement is too far-reaching to achieve in a single conversation. Below are examples of the shift from the client’s desired movement to the agreed movement, i.e. the outcome the helper promises to help the client achieve:

*The client’s original desired movement:* I would like to discuss the problems I keep running into when chairing the meetings in my department.

*Agreed movement:* The helper helps the client: (a) to reflect over what apparently went wrong the last time he had problems with his moderator role or chairmanship, and (b) to identify what he can do to strengthen his facilitative skills in the future.

*The client’s original desired movement:* I need help to win a power struggle with a colleague.

*Agreed movement:* The helper helps the client: (a) to determine whether a power struggle is actually taking place, and (b) to explore ways of handling the relationship that protect his interests, though in an ethical way.

*The client’s original desired movement:* I have had a very successful process in relation to one of my own clients. I would like to explore the reasons why it went so well.

*Helper’s reaction:* That sounds fine. I would like to help you do this.
In the first example, one may assume that some time passed before the parties reached the agreed movement; the contract phase is often quite lengthy. In the second example, it probably took even longer, and here the helper has focused on avoiding an unethical conversation contract. In the third example, the contract phase is completed almost before it has begun, also showing that you do not necessarily have to talk about problems or dilemmas; helping conversations may be about learning from something that has gone well.

As seen in the definition above, the complete contract comprises not just the goals, but ultimately also the means (approach, methods, and tools - including conversation tools) agreed upon to reach the goal – keeping in mind that the choice of means is largely the responsibility and concern of the professional participant. It also comprises framework and resources, including time and money. Lastly, the contract implies the relevant mutual role relationships, i.e. the parties’ rights and obligations to each other, including ground rules. Apart from the time limits and any fees, most of this will normally be implicit in a helping conversation. The agreed movement, however, should be explicit.

The contract concept rests on the principle of voluntariness, or at least acceptance of the given conditions under which an area of “common ground” is to be established and agreed upon. As the professional party, you must respect that genuine voluntariness involves a choice. If you want a Yes, you must risk a No.

But can a No even be tolerated in the specific situation? And what if you cannot reach an agreement on the goal of the conversation? Initially, it may be a question of finding the minimal platform on which a contract is possible. Otherwise, the parties must either leave each other or accept an entirely different type of conversation with strong elements of control, coercion, force, etc. Ending with this kind of understanding may very well provide a sense of relief, as it is preferable to deceiving each other with a pseudo contract.

4. Contract management

It is the professional party’s responsibility to ensure a clear contract. It is her management tool; however, the contract ensures that her client’s interests and needs are addressed throughout the conversation.

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6 It is not uncommon to equate the kind of contract tool that I propose with the psychological contract. The concept of psychological contracts is introduced by Rousseau (1995) as well as Schein (1999). Rousseau deals with contracts between organizations and their members and in her view, ‘psychological’ refers to the implicit character of mutual expectations that may not even coincide. Schein used the term as early as in 1993, referring to Argyris; his concept concerns both the tacit expectations between members of an organization and “the tacit expectations on the part of the consultant and client” (1999:235), and he prefers that even the latter type of contract remains informal and implicit in order for it not to interfere with a flexible helping process. Since my advice for the professional part is to be rather explicit, I do not use the term ‘psychological contract’ when dealing with the contract tool.
When is the contract negotiated? From the outset it is important for the helper to “set the stage” by explaining/recalling the background, prior agreements, overall goal and the given framework for this particular conversation. The contract phase then follows. You might even decide to write the agreed movement down on a piece of paper, a screen or blackboard, so that all participants keep it in mind.

As noted, the contract concept entails that both parties must be able to sign off on it, either literally or figuratively, and to do so voluntarily. Therefore, each of the participants must be able to propose what should and should not be included in the contract. For example, the helper must be able to veto what she sees as an unethical contract. She also has influence in helping to define and concretise the proposed movement, and she can have an opinion about what would be most expedient to work on. However, the novice helper must be careful not to make too many suggestions regarding the client’s content; the client owns his subject matter and “meddling” without challenging this principle is an art.

The contract need not necessarily be finalised once and for all; it must be possible to renegotiate. In the negotiation and renegotiation phases, you have a type of meta-contract that is often implicit: We are now negotiating and we are doing so, in principle, in a symmetrical relationship. Only when the contract is in place do we truly enter into the asymmetrical roles of helper and client.

Tangents and loops may arise during the negotiation phase, in which one of the parties says something important about the subject matter itself. But it must be possible to return to the contract issue and avoid being carried away by an interesting discussion. A fair proportion of the hundreds of professional conversations I have been engaged in, observed and reflected on as supervisor and trainer have risked ending in chit-chat solely due to a missing or inadequate contract. Conversely, almost half the work is completed when a suitable contract is established.

Be careful not to end up with a pseudo contract, i.e. an apparent agreement where the parties each have a hidden agenda.

Attention to the contract can be maintained by repeatedly referring to it out loud during the conversation or by looking in its direction if you have written it down. When the contract is in place, the helper will always be able to come back to it if the conversation does not continue by itself, or when assessing progress. Here are some statements by the helper that may be useful during the conversation:

                Helper: Are we still doing what we agreed upon, or have we moved somewhere else, and if so, is this good enough for you?
Helper: Given that we agreed on X, how would you like to use me for the remainder of the conversation? Alternatively: ...then I would suggest that we spend the rest of the conversation discussing Y! What do you say?

Helper: Do you gather that you are receiving qualified help with what we agreed on at the beginning of the conversation?

Helper: Now we are about halfway through, so let’s stop for a moment. Tell me what you think we have achieved and how you would like to spend the last half hour!

Helper: We have reached this point in our conversation (refer to a point on an imaginary line) and we have agreed to reach here (an endpoint on the line that corresponds to the contract). What do you think it will take for us to reach the goal?

To summarize, the conversation contract is a tool that can contribute to creating a fruitful conversation. Now I will examine two other types of conversation management that overlap with contract management: process management and content management.

5. Process management

Process management is an art requiring tools that can take a lifetime to perfect.

As a minimum, the helper is responsible for managing the conversation process. She must assume maximum process authority, while regularly ensuring that the client finds her conduct acceptable, by using process contracts. It is usually a relief for the client that the helper “takes responsibility for the process” as it allows him to concentrate on the content. Taking responsibility for process management is often difficult for novice helpers. One of the reasons for this is that they find it difficult to separate process and content, and that they are (rightly) afraid of appearing to gain too much control over the content.

The helper may manage the conversation by structuring the process and allowing the changes in the conversation to reflect this structure. I distinguish between three kinds of shifts: phase shifts, track shifts, and level shifts. Also discussed is making shortcuts in the conversation as well as allowing for pauses. Heightened awareness about these tools can prevent the conversation from idling for too long and may contribute to the right priorities in relation to the content goals of the conversation.

7 Stelter (2002:246) speaks of position and perspective shifts, something which might have been included in this section.
A phase shift requires that the conversation is divided into phases. However, such division is rarely determined in advance; often it is constructed retrospectively as a result of the helper reflecting on the somewhat messy process and finding an inherent structure. These phase designations may be linked with an active phase shift, e.g.:

Helper: I have now heard your explanation of X in its entirety; the next step appears to be that we examine the precise situation in which you – as you said – lost control.

Helper: We decided to talk about x, y and z. So far, it has mostly been about x and y. Wouldn’t it be an idea to move on to z? Do you agree?

Track shift. It may be difficult to distinguish between track shifts and phase shifts, but there is no natural succession in the former, rather an abrupt change, e.g. through “interruption” on the part of the helper:

Helper: I need us to park x – at least for a time. Right now it seems more important that we jump to y. What do you say?

Helper: Let’s pause for a moment. I know that you are talking about x, but I sense that there is a need for us to take a look at y. Having said that, it is important we only switch lanes if it makes sense to you!

Note that process management does not have to be dictatorial. The helper must directly or indirectly obtain consent from the client by using the process contract. If she does not obtain consent, she must have strong reasons for maintaining the idea of a phase or track shift.

Level shift. The helper can stop the flow and change the process level and hereby go-to-meta, which is also called a time-out. The above examples show how short meta-phases are used to give the client influence over the further process. The influence can also provide feedback to the helper, so that she can make her own corrections:

Helper: I sense that I have been controlling the conversation too much – what is your opinion?
Client: Yes, possibly.
Helper: I think I got carried away. What should I ask you about so that it makes sense in relation to what we agreed from the start?

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8 The term time-out is used widely in the literature about professional helping conversations; I believe it originates from systemic family therapy. The term go-to-meta may have been coined by Søren Willert and myself a long time ago. The so-called Gamemaster Model involves a level corresponding to “my” meta level (called process level, an ill-chosen wording); contracts are negotiated and renegotiated on this level, and switches occur through time-outs (Moltke & Molly 2009).
Helper: I need to pause for a moment, just to be sure that we are on the same page. If I have understood you correctly, you are saying x – is that right?
Client: No, not entirely. What I meant was y...

In the first example, the helper uses transparency and in the second example, mirroring as additional tools (see section 6).

As noted, a level shift involves going-to-meta. Meta communication comprises messages about messages, and a meta level is one level above the preceding communication. For example, meta communication is talking about what you have just talked about, or what the next step should be. One can shift levels in countless ways (and move onto the metameta level). This typically happens when the helper stops the conversation and asks the client: “Is the way we have been talking about the issues so far OKAY?” She may even use a time-out to ask herself in a transparent way:

Helper: The way I have been asking about your subject matter so far has been very fact-oriented, but I’m uncertain whether this is sufficiently helpful in understanding what we agreed this conversation should help to clarify. I can sense that you have strong feelings on the subject. And I am asking myself whether this would be a good time to examine these feelings. Do you have any opinions on this?

It will often feel natural to perform a level shift as part of a phase or track shift, or vice versa.

**Shortcut.** Yet another process management tool is to take shortcuts into the core of the matter, rather than taking unnecessary detours around the matter. An example:

The contract between helper and client (a teacher) states that the client needs help to clarify her doubt about whether a certain student in the third grade requires more special needs education. The helper spends a long time asking about the student, the teaching and the class.
Instead, she could have taken a shortcut by immediately passing the ball to the client: “You mentioned a doubt – could you elaborate on this?”

**Pause.** When pauses arise in a conversation, many novices will find it embarrassing and rush to fill the gap by talking. For helpers it is something of an art to take long enough pauses at the right moments in the conversation – moment where the client needs time “at

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9 Note that this is verbal (digital) meta communication. An altogether different form of meta-communication is the way in which the non-verbal (analogue) communication continually comments on the ongoing verbal communication. Watzlawick et al. (1967) cover both types in their landmark communication theory.
home with himself” to digest and think, and perhaps to begin developing a new understanding of his issue. In other words, time to reflect. From this perspective, the pause is another important tool in process management. The same applies to the use of tempo changes in your speech.

6. Content management

In this section, I provide examples of how the helper can manage the conversation via content-oriented input. There are fluid boundaries between content management on the one hand, and the tools used in the actual process of fulfilling the contract on the other. I have attempted to select tools that the helper can use to give the conversation direction and momentum.

**Content structuring.** We have seen that conversation management may take place as process structuring. Structuring can also occur on the content level. In fact, there have already been a number of examples in which the helper used simple means to create or recall a thematic structure and utilized it as a basis for moving the conversation forward:

    Helper: I know that you are talking about x, but I sense that there is a greater need for y.

    Helper: We decided to talk about x, y and z. So far, it has mostly been about x and y. Wouldn’t it be an idea to move on to z?

Content structuring can also be done by articulating alternatives from which the client can choose:

    Helper: You now have the choice of continuing with x, y or z. Or have I forgotten something?

Structuring content is not the same as determining content; especially not if you remember the contract tool, e.g. “Is it OK” or “What do you say?”

**Simple mirroring** is assigning the most descriptive and least judgmental words, pictures or metaphors to the content. By definition, mirroring presupposes a given perspective – that of the party performing the mirroring in the conversation. You can mirror both the verbal and non-verbal communication, but here we concentrate on the former. Simple mirroring is relatively “fail safe”. Nonetheless, it requires that the helper select something ahead of something else; she gives it meaning through her attention and thus, more or less subtly, manages the conversation.

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10 Verbal mirroring is similar to what Alrø & Kristiansen (1998:188) call paraphrasing. Their “interpretive paraphrasing” (ibid.:106ff) better resembles what I call enriched mirroring. For a more general account on mirroring in professional conversations, see Willert 2011.
If the helper wants to mirror, she must also listen actively\(^\text{11}\). For a time she must ignore the many thoughts, questions, comments, suggestions, etc. that come to mind and occupy her attention. Seen from the client’s perspective, active listening and mirroring is appreciative; the client feels seen and heard, and gets the opportunity to view himself from the helper’s perspective, i.e. from the outside.

Mirroring covers a wide spectrum, from a summary of everything the helper has heard until now, to repetition of a single and seemingly crucial word or sentence the client has expressed that sparks the helper’s curiosity. Regardless of whether mirroring is short or long, in simple mirroring the rule of thumb is that the helper attempts to be as accurate as possible in the reproduction of the facts, i.e. using the client’s own words.

It is also possible to reproduce the statements with other words, thereby perhaps adding some important nuances. Now we are approaching what I call enriched mirroring, which is akin to reframing and positive reformulation. This is an important tool to the trained helper, while the untrained helper should stick to simply mirroring the client’s own language and modes of expression. Regardless of which form is used, it is vital to check whether the client feels you have hit the mark.

In enriched mirroring, or as Søren Willert always says: use of the distorted mirror (Willert 2011), the helper has processed what the client has said before mirroring it. The words are somewhat different and possibly more precise; the emphasis is slightly changed; an otherwise jumbled group of statements now emerge with greater clarity so the client understands himself better than before; or the helper enriches by transparently merging her own perspective on the subject matter in the hope that it may contribute positively. Example in which the client’s non-verbal communication is also mirrored:

_helper: As I hear it, you have difficulty getting through to your manager because his “confrontational style” poses a barrier, and even scares you a little. You did not actually use the word “scared”, but this is the feeling I sense in you – please tell me if this seems incorrect. I once had a similar relationship with my manager, but then I started thinking that he probably did the best he could and that I had to help out in order for us to be on the same wavelength. Is this in any way helpful?

Interpretation. A mirroring is less binding and less risky than an interpretation, especially if the interpretation is stated as an authoritative truth. However, you can incorporate an

\(^{11}\) Therefore, the concept of mirroring is closely related to active listening, which is often discussed in texts on professional conversations. Ultimately, this leads back to Carl Rogers and his client-centred counselling. According to Lennér-Axelson & Thylefors (1998:101) active listening is about establishing clarity concerning the client’s needs; the helper accepts, listens and supports without necessarily consenting. In fact, Rogers talked about deep listening. Vindeløv (2004) notes that active listening involves taking an interest in what lies behind the statement.
interpretation into mirroring if you remember to take full responsibility for it. This was illustrated in the example above, and here is another example in which the helper is also transparent about her reasons for the interpretation:

Helper: When you say this, I cannot help but wonder whether you actually don’t want to begin working. This feeling arose when you started talking about x. But I may be wrong, and I also know that I may be entering a minefield by saying this at all.

Hypothesis: A hypothesis is very similar to an interpretation. On the one hand the hypothesis seems stodgy by being phrased as an ascertainment. On the other hand, it is easier for the client to dissent, as the idea of a hypothesis is that it can be just as easily invalidated as confirmed, and in both cases the investigative approach can result in important insights\(^\text{12}\). The use of hypotheses (and interpretations) requires that the helper makes it legitimate for the client to dissent. I recycle the previous example with a slight variation:

Helper: When you said that, an idea came to me: That you actually do not want to begin working. Think of it as a hypothesis that may be just as easily right as it is wrong. What do you think? It is important to me that you do not just agree because I put forward the hypothesis.

Thought experiment\(^\text{13}\). Here we are operating in an “if-then” domain, where thoughts can be explored without having already calculated all of the consequences, and without them being binding. Just as with the above tools, here the helper has an opportunity to bring her own perspective into play, in a non-directive way, which can help to manage the conversation and create momentum. Example:

Helper: You have talked about how tired of your job you are, but that you have many reasons for not quitting. Now I would like you to join me in a little thought experiment: Imagine that you actually quit tomorrow and that – here we do a little magic – finances weren’t a problem for you. How would you feel then? And what would you do? Please play around with the idea!

Brainstorm. Related to the thought experiment, brainstorming involves listing all sorts of possibilities, or worst case scenarios, or strategies, or solutions, or benefits and costs – without considering whether they are completely realistic in the specific case. This frees

\(^{12}\) Haslebo & Nielsen (1997:115-19) see the hypothesis as an interpretation that contributes to the parties relating in an exploratory and curious way, giving a “free space” to see things from above/outside/below. Søholm et al. (2006) write extensively about the use of hypotheses.

\(^{13}\) The thought experiment is related to what Stelter (2002:240-1) calls wonder questions, and which in other contexts is referred to as miracle questions (Vindeløv 2004). According to Stelter et al., these tools open up the imagination to potential solutions to the problem.
the imagination and, who knows – perhaps an important insight is hiding where you least expect it!

*Question vs. ‘passing the ball’.* The literature in the field offers a myriad of question types, and in many texts questions are cited as the preeminent tool in professional helper conversations. I do not agree. Exaggerated use of ingenious questions can result in the helper becoming a kind of employer for the client. Furthermore, there are other tools than questions, examples of which are previously mentioned in this text:

   Helper: I sense that I have been controlling the conversation too much – what is your opinion?

   Helper: ... but then I started thinking that he probably did the best he could and that I had to help out in order for us to be on the same wavelength. Can you use this in any way?

   Helper: You have probably already considered several ways of doing this – if so, what were they?

   Helper: You mentioned a doubt – elaborate on this!

Obviously, questions are formulated in the end of the first three examples, but they are mostly signals that now it is the client’s turn to say something: the ball is passed. A parallel way of passing the ball is to encourage the client to “say something” (shown with exclamation mark in the last example). In principle, you can conduct a professional conversation without asking a single question. Questions can be replaced with statements of what the consultant is interested in hearing more about, after which the ball is passed to the other party. Here are two additional examples:

   Helper: The purpose of this conversation is for me to help you clarify X. Tell me a little about X!

   Helper: We agreed that one of the topics of this conversation would be Y. I would like to hear about how you view Y and whether you are satisfied with the current state of things. Try to give me a picture!

Managing a conversation by continually passing the ball reflects a specific view of the conversation – above all that it consists of an exchange of perspectives on The Common Third (Madsen 1996).
7. Concluding remarks

This paper is about managing the conversation and not about the conversation per se, nor about the effects on the participants. I have reviewed the following management tools: The conversation contract – content as well as process contracts, process structuring, phase shifts, track shifts, level shifts, shortcuts, pauses, content structuring, simple and enriched mirroring, active listening, interpretations, hypotheses, thought experiments, brainstorming, questions, and passing the ball.

In some cases a conversation easily develops in a positive direction without any form of management, but in most helping conversations, a lack of management will lead to a messy structure and an unclear framework, which may foster insecurity, fear, irrational reactions and primitive ways of relating (Madsen 2008). Conversely, a suitable degree of “order” can create the clarity and calm that is needed for both parties to take an exploratory approach to what they have agreed, promoting movement by the client. However, over-structuring is detrimental, as it hinders movement, development and creativity.

It is a matter of finding the right balance in order to provide optimal conditions for the client’s “freedom of movement”. This is reminiscent of Kurt Lewin’s concept of life space and his model of change: Unfreeze-Move-Refreeze. In order to unfreeze the mental structures that currently prevent the client from making the agreed movement, an optimum sense of security is key; this is established in part by the helper ensuring a clear framework and contract (Madsen 2006, 2007).

The conditions for freedom of movement must be created by the helper. Many professional helpers hesitate to assume professional authority, thinking perhaps that this will give them too much power or that it will be seen as being disrespectful towards the client. Or they have an ill-conceived ideal of symmetry in the conversation. But for the sake of all participants, the professional participant should at least assume full process management authority – and preferably a little above and beyond. This by no means implies that she must be “one step ahead” at all times. It is a matter of skilfully switching between the three basic positions in the communication triangle in order to avoid “the muddy we”: the home position (I), the other’s position (You), and the realm of The Common Third (It). It is also a matter of prolific conversation management.

The management tools used by the professional party in the conversation are either non-conscious and unreflective or they are used consciously. The better you master the tools, the more “automatic” they will become, i.e. transformed from conscious use to tacit knowledge and internalized competence14 - which is a good thing, because during the acquisition phase the tools will often seem rigid and strange to the novice.

14 Donald Schön has an original and interesting take on these phenomena in his book, Educating the Reflective Practitioner (1987).
References


