

## I Don't Know What I Want

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Symbolic Modelling is an outcome orientated methodology,<sup>1</sup> but that doesn't mean we *only* work with desired outcomes. And it certainly doesn't mean we dismiss or ignore problems. While our preference is to facilitate clients to identify a desired outcome from the outset, that may not always be possible or advisable.

A previous blog, [The Tree of Wisdom video](#), was an example of how to work with a client who had a desired outcome and yet something prevented her from describing it and developing it into a metaphor-outcome landscape. Sometimes a client is incapable of answering the initial "And what would you like to have happen?" question with a desired outcome – even with help from our [PRO model](#). (Below capitalised use of 'Problem', 'Remedy' and 'Outcome' indicates the precise definition given in the model rather than the more general use of these terms.)

In this blog I use a transcript from *Resolving Traumatic Memories* to consider what to do when a client cannot give a desired outcome at all. In the transcript David Grove has little choice but to explore a problem until a desired outcome becomes apparent. The client (on page 257) presents with the problem of headaches (although the underlying issue is the effect of memories of sexual abuse as a child which is adversely affecting her relationships with men as an adult). When the client is asked what she wants she doesn't know, and her responses give no hint of a desired outcome. David therefore uses Clean Language facilitates the client to develop the word "headache" into the metaphor of "a hand", and then asks what the *hand* would like. This illustrates one of the advantages of working in metaphor. A headache can't do much other than make a headache, whereas a hand can do that *and*, potentially, can do lots of other things too.

Below I use the client's words from David's transcript to illustrate hypothetically a respectful way of encouraging a desired outcome to make itself known – but only when the client is ready. Using our PRO model the session might have gone something like this:

And what would you like to have happen?

*I have headaches.*

And when you have headaches, what would you like to have happen?

*I don't know.*

And when you have headaches, and you don't know, what would you like to have happen?

*I don't want them.*

The client has been invited three times to give a desired Outcome. Continuing to do so would probably be disrespectful and counter-productive. One option is to develop the headache into a metaphor (see the [State to a Metaphor](#) vector for how to do this), and then to ask the *metaphor* for it's intention. In David's transcript the headaches are represented by a hand:

And what would that *hand* like to have happen?

Notice the "that" in the question requests an answer from that specific hand (and not any other hand or a general hand). In the transcript the client replies:

*The hand wants to hurt me.*

Now we have a desired Outcome for the hand.<sup>2</sup> You may not think that “wants to hurt me” is a good, positive, SMART or well-formed outcome, but as an “equal information employer” we set aside our personal judgement and work with whatever is given. (For more on how to do this see Keith Fail and my article, [Macabre Metaphors](#)).

Having identified a metaphor for the Problem (headaches) and identified its intention (to “hurt me”), it could be time to find out whether the client was now any clearer about *her* desired outcome. When asked, she replies:

*I want it to stop.*

We can see an evolution of the client's ability to say what she wants. She has gone from “I don't know” to “I don't want them” to “I want it to stop”. A Remedy such as this is usually a stepping stone on the way to a desired Outcome.

However it would seem the desire of the hand to hurt is incompatible with her desire for the hand to stop hurting her. To an observer this might seem unremarkable, but to the client just saying these words may make it very real and frightening. In this case, my approach would be to slow down, go at a pace that works for the client and wait to see what unfolds. I would start by acknowledging the likely incompatibility and then invite the client to find out what happens next:

And when hand wants to hurt you and you want hand to stop, and hand wants to hurt and you want it to stop, ... then ... what ... happens?

With another client I might have followed the PRO and ended with the question, “... what would you like to have happen?” but given her history of having been abused, I definitely would not want to be perceived as pushing the client to satisfy my agenda.

Later in David's transcript, when the client is again asked what she'd like she says:

*Cut it off at the elbow.*

The client is proposing an even clearer Remedy, and I note that currently it doesn't include any agency (who or what is going to do the action). I'm not saying it has to, I'm just noting it doesn't. However, when the client is next asked what she wants, she says:

*I could take a sword and cut it off at the elbow.*

The statement includes both an agent (“I”) and a means to enact the action (“a sword”). I also note that the proposed Remedy is hedged by the word “could”.

Later in the session the client has a realisation – even if she cuts off the “arm” her Remedy isn't going to last long:

*If it's got the energy it would come back and do some more. It wants to have the energy.*

This is the second desired Outcome: the hand “wants to hurt me” and the arm “wants to have the energy”. Interestingly this provokes a reaction and an increase in the client's sense of personal agency. She says:

*I won't give it to it ... it's mine.*

There will likely be a resource embedded in this statement, but I'll leave the topic of latent resources for another blog. In the transcript the client continues to try out various Remedies (such as the perpetrator knowing how much pain he put her through) until she declares:

*I need to heal myself.*

There are no conditions or hedges in this explicit statement of a desire.<sup>3</sup> Technically, according to the PRO definitions, this is still a Remedy since "heal" presupposes the removal of a Problem – a wound or injury. Interestingly though, 'heal' comes from old German *heilen*, 'to make whole' which edges ever closer to our definition of a desired Outcome – a desire for there to be something new and agreeable added to the world. In *Creating*, Robert Fritz likens it to an artist's desire to bring something into being.

However, the wider context takes precedence over a narrow definition. Given where the client was when they started the session and how far they've come, sensibility dictates that the statement is honoured and elaborated. Or, as David Grove poetically put it, "blessed by your questions".

Given the circumstances and the stage of the process, I would likely avoid any clever questions that focussed attention on the client's "I", "need" or "self" and ask something very simple about the metaphor that has just made its presence known:

And you need to heal yourself. And when you need to heal yourself, what kind of heal is that heal?

Returning to the transcript we find a surprising twist occurs. Having metaphorically enacted her desire to inflict pain on the perpetrator, the client demonstrates a remarkable degree of compassion and a new desire emerges:

*I need to heal him myself.*

The addition of a single word "him" transforms her statement. Although this is still not a clear desired Outcome (by the PRO definition), if we compare the client's latest statements with her starting point of "I don't know" we can see how, bit by bit and in her own time, she has begun to connect with her desires.

While each case creates its own pathway, the example described above is typical of the step-by-step movement from little or no desire to an unambiguous "proclamation" (Grove) of a personal desired Outcome.

### **Summary of process**

1. Ask for a client's desired Outcome several times.

If none is forthcoming:

2. Develop a metaphor for the problem.
3. Ask for the desired Outcome of a symbol with agency.
4. Ask client for a desired Outcome in relation to symbol's intention.

If none is forthcoming:

5. Follow the logic of any Remedy.
6. Keep looking out for opportunities to ask the client WWYLTHH? You are aiming to calibrate when a client's desire for something new to be created (or their ability to articulate that desire) is ready to make itself known.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See:

[Outcome Orientation](#)  
[Vectoring and Systemic Outcome Orientation](#)  
[Desired Outcomes - Part 1](#)

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note whether the answer given is the *symbol's intention* rather than the client's intention for the symbol. In this case it seems so.

<sup>3</sup> There are a limited number of words in English that express *desire*, e.g. want, wish, would like, need, must have, etc. – my Thesaurus lists about 20. I am aware that from a client's viewpoint each of these words may have a very different connotation. The PRO's job is to facilitate the client to *identify* a desired Outcome in whatever way they want to express it. Later on, if needs be, the particular desire word can be explored.