

Reflexive questions in a coaching psychology context

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Asking the right questions at the right time is an essential tool of coaching psychology so as to generate self-awareness in the coachee as well as a sense of responsibility and the will to make a change.

In this article, building on principles and methods originally developed in the family therapy arena, the authors show how reflexive questions can be used in coaching psychology. The target group for this article is, therefore, coaching psychologists and executive coaches in general who want to enhance their skills in asking effective questions.

By applying Tomm's taxonomy of questions (Tomm, 1967, 1988) to Dilts' model of change (Dilts, 1996), the authors bring together theories from systemic therapy with a change management framework based on neurolinguistic programming. The deliberate and perhaps provocative combination of two different approaches derived from the therapy field might be especially useful for coaching psychologists who are involved in change processes in organisations and who are open to applying new ideas to their practice.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT QUESTIONS to ask when we are coaching and at what time? In this article, the authors focus on the application of questioning techniques from systemic family therapy (Tomm, 1987, 1988) linked to a change management framework from neurolinguistic programming (Dilts 1996) which has been applied in both therapy and organisational consultancy settings. The relevance of techniques from systemic therapy to coaching psychology is that they link one-to-one work to the whole system or organisation where the coachee works.

Executive coaching involves a one-to-one relationship between a coach and coachee, usually a manager or leader who wishes to become more effective in their role in the organisation. The coach is usually external to the organisation and he or she may bring expertise in terms of experience of management and leadership; psychological knowledge and therapeutic practice, in the case of coaching psychologists; or knowledge of that organisation's particular business (O'Neill 2000). The coach's role, however, is to start with the experience and issues brought by the coachee and to facilitate their own analysis and solution of problems in a process

of 'assisted self-exploration' (Huffington, 2006). As Gebelein *et al.* (2001) say, 'coaches do not develop people; they equip people to develop themselves.'

'Coaching psychology is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches' (Palmer & Whybrow, 2006, p.8). It is important that coaching psychology is not individualised and split off from the organisational client that legitimises and sponsors it. Therefore, the coaching psychologist needs to pay close attention to the links between the issues brought by the coachee and what this represents in terms of organisation or system dynamics as well as individual or personal dynamics; and also to help the coachee make these links and develop their own systemic thinking and capacity to influence the organisation in their leadership role (Campbell *et al.*, 1989, 1991). This will, in turn, benefit not only the individual but also the organisation in that the coachee will then be acting to improve the organisation's functioning as well as his or her own functioning (Huffington, 2006). The techniques used in coaching psychology can thus assist in this

process of helping the coachee develop and use this systemic perspective to their advantage. Reflexive questions can be a key tool in helping the coachee do this.

Systemic questioning

Systemic practice emphasises the power of questions in facilitating change; and particularly the use of systemic questions, or questions that help the coachee to develop a systemic perspective on their issues or problems rather than seeing them purely as personal concerns (Mueller & Hoffman, 2002) This has been called 'interventive interviewing' (Tomm, 1987, 1988) and is clearly of relevance to clients who are being coached.

Tomm (1988) defines certain types of systemic questioning:

● **Lineal questions**

These are asked to orient the coach to the coachee's situation and help him/her to investigate it. Lineal questions are factual and based on 'Who did what?, Where?, When? And Why? These are mostly used in the beginning of a session to get initial information. For example: 'How old are you?' 'What is your role in the organisation?' 'Can you describe your organisation's culture?'

● **Circular questions**

The coaching psychologist as an explorer tries to find the patterns that connect persons, objects, actions, perceptions, ideas, feelings, events, beliefs, context, etc. For example: 'How is it that we find ourselves together today?' (I called because I am worried about my relationship with my boss) 'Who else worries?' (my colleagues) 'Who do you think worries the most, etc.'

● **Strategic questions**

These tend to open up new avenues of thinking and, if the coachee accepts the challenge of strategic questions, they can help to promote change. A coaching psychologist might ask strategic questions like:

'What has stopped you so far from talking to your colleague about your conflict with him, instead of telling your boss?'

'Wouldn't you like to stop your arguments rather than being so preoccupied by them?'

● **Reflexive questions**

As the coaching psychologist introduces a hypothetical future scenario or the coachee is asked to take the observer perspective on his or her situation, the coachee is encouraged to mobilise his or her own problem-solving resources. Continuing the above dialogue, reflexive questions could be:

'If you were to share with your colleague how you experience the conflict and how it was getting you down, what do you imagine he might think or do?'

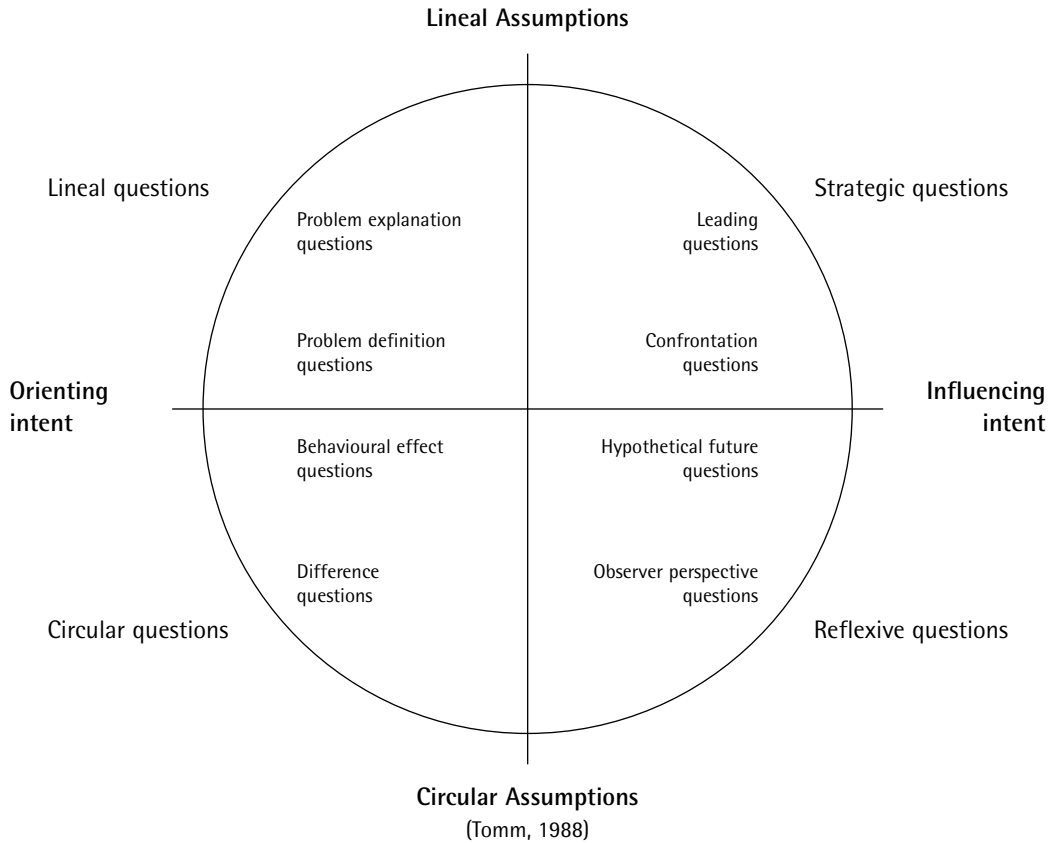
'How do you think others experience the conflict you are having with your colleague?'

Figure 1 (alongside) represents the four main types of questions, the assumptions upon which they are based and their intent (Tomm, 1988, p.6).

The application of reflexive questioning to executive coaching

Tomm's assumption is that a therapist should adopt a 'facilitative posture and deliberately ask those kinds of questions that are liable to open up new possibilities for self-healing' (Tomm, 1987, p.167). The role and the goal of the coaching psychologist and the therapist therefore have similarities; however the coaching psychologist is more likely to be working with 'normal, non-clinical populations' (Palmer & Whybrow, 2005, p.7) whereas the therapist is more

Figure 1: Diagram showing four main types of systemic questions, the assumptions upon which they are based and their intent (Tomm, 1988, p.6).



likely to be working with people who are suffering from some kind of psychopathology.

Tomm points out that, in asking 'reflexive questions', the therapist acts more as a coach or guide as they trigger reflexive activity. Using effective questions rather than instructions or commands to raise awareness and responsibility has already been identified as one of the most important tools of a coach and one of the most important skills a coach has to develop (Whitmore, 2002; Starr, 2003).

The coaching psychologist, like the therapist, needs to be aware of the effects of different questions and the most appropriate timing for each.

Dilts' change management framework

Robert Dilts, a leading figure in the field of training in neurolinguistic programming, has developed a model for change, which has also been used in coaching (Stoeger, 1996). Given that the goal of executive coaching is to support change, Dilts' change management framework helps to identify the level of the required change and suggests ideas about possible interventions.

Dilts (1996) identifies five different levels of change:

- Environment;
- Behaviour;
- Capabilities;
- Beliefs;
- Identity.

Environment

Environment refers to everything outside yourself. It consists of things such as the type of office layout, location, room, food, noise level. Environmental factors are often very easy to change and may have a major impact on work performance and job satisfaction.

Behaviour

This level concerns the specific actions or reactions of a person within an environment. If you take the picture of an iceberg, behaviour is probably the part above the surface that can be observed by others, while capabilities, beliefs and identity stay below the surface.

Capabilities

'Capabilities' or competencies have to do with the mental strategies and maps people develop to guide their behaviour based on their assessment of their abilities.

Beliefs

The level of belief provides the reinforcement that supports or inhibits capabilities and behaviours. Next to helping to develop behavioural skills and capabilities, a coach must also address the presuppositions, beliefs and values of his or her clients. Beliefs and values are both personal and organisational and influence the amount of *motivation* and authorisation people bring to their roles and tasks.

Identity

Identity involves a person's role, mission and/or sense of self. It refers to personal as well as professional identity, or sense of identity derived from a work role and membership of a work group or organisation.

Dilts (1996) makes clear that changes at a lower level could, but would not necessarily affect functioning at higher levels. However, changing something on a higher level would always change things at lower levels.

Dilts' model can be criticised for being simplistic; however, one major goal in the coaching process is about bringing clarity to

clients to help them become proactive in solving their own problems. The experienced coaching psychologist will be aware of the limitations of the model as well as being aware how the levels are connected and how change at one level can support change at another level. The model helps the coaching psychologist to clearly identify the area of change needed by the client and suggests concrete ideas about where to start work with the coachee.

The application of systemic questioning in Dilts' change management framework

When the purpose of a coaching session is to support the coachee to develop strategies for change, it is clear to see how the four major types of systemic questions are applicable to each level of Dilts' model of change.

Environment

Lineal questions can be a useful and quick way to generate information about the environment. For example, a coachee who feels she should not be involved in the daily work of her team members might be asked by the coaching psychologist how far away she sits from her team members, if there is a kind of informal meeting room (e.g. kitchen), who is sitting next to whom, etc. At the same time, this kind of question might highlight that sitting far away (maybe even on another floor) or a lack of an informal or formal meeting room might have a major impact on the communication in the team.

Behaviour

Questions at this level need to be more action-oriented as well as exploratory, so could be lineal as well as circular. They help to understand the context and clarify meanings.

Lineal questions are mainly focused on WHAT is to be done, WHEN and by WHOM, for example, the above mentioned team manager could be asked:

- What could you do to foster the communication in your team?
- When do you want to improve the communication?

Focussing more on the interaction in the team/system, the questions become circular to help the client to re-examine their assumptions and prejudices:

- Who might be the one who has the best network in your team?
- Who else wants to get the communication in the team improved?
- Who do you imagine suffers the most? Who has the most conflicts in your team?
- What do you do when your team member complains about the increasing conflicts in the team?
- If she were to be more supportive of you, what would you be seeing her doing?

Capabilities

When it comes to the level of capabilities, development may be needed by the client so learning on and off the job is important. Questions at this level are directed to improving the understanding and skill-set of the coachee. As the coaching psychologist behaves more like a teacher or instructor, strategic questions might be helpful. These are asked in order to influence or even train in a specific manner.

Therefore, taking an example of someone who has a conflict with his female boss, strategic questions might be:

- Why don't you tell her that you cannot read her hand-writing?
- What competencies do you need to tell her that you are too busy to take all her private calls?
- What would happen if you suggest she reads her e-mail directly instead of you printing them out for her?
- Can you see how your smile and inability to say no keeps her asking for more?

The coaching psychologist has to be aware that the challenging nature of strategic questions might provoke resistance from the coachee, or even a disruption in his or her relationship with them.

Beliefs and identity

At the levels of beliefs and identity, the role of the coaching psychologist is much closer to

the role of the therapist than at all other levels because this is when the coaching psychologist or therapist is focussed on changing or modifying self-limiting beliefs. Reflexive questions are an essential tool for the coaching psychologist to facilitate self-awareness and to help the client to find solutions.

Tomm (1987) differentiates between **different types of reflexive questions**. An awareness of his typology is useful in the coaching process as it enables the coach to use reflexive questions more deliberately as well as being more aware of the influence of different kinds of question. The most useful kinds of reflexive question for the coaching process are:

- Future-oriented questions;
- Observer-perspective questions;
- Hypothetical questions
 - Unexpected Context–Change questions
 - Embedded–Suggestion questions
 - Normative–Comparison questions.

Future-oriented questions

In the coaching process, future-oriented questions help a coachee to change his or her perspective and focus on possibilities he would like to see. It stops him or her repeating all the reasons why a problem cannot be solved, which he might have repeated several times before and convinced his coach that there is no hope of change. These kinds of questions are goal-oriented and solution-oriented and are probably the best known 'systemic questions' used in the coaching process. They are used to move someone forward from a problem to a solution.

Helpful future questions in the coaching process might be:

- If this discussion ended in a satisfactory way, what would be happening? How would you recognise a successful outcome? What do you want to achieve long term?
- How much personal control or influence can you gain over your goal? What is your short term goal along the way? When do you want to achieve it by?

- How does a possible solution look and is that positive/challenging/attainable?
- What would be described as a success for the department in a year's time?
- What would be a good solution for you?
- How do you see your organisation in five years time?

Observer-perspective questions

As conflict resolution is one important topic in a coaching psychology, the first step is the ability of the coachee to find a position where he/she is less emotionally involved. Observer-perspective questions are a helpful tool to support the client to become less involved and try to take a neutral position. The following questions are helpful in this process:

- When you have this angry discussion with y, how would x describe the conflict?
- ... and what might x be feeling at that point?
- How would others see your approach to the problem?
- How would x react to a problem solving approach from you?
- What do you do that others most appreciate/or most dislike ...?
- How much – do you think – is x interested in solving the problem?
- In having the angry discussion with you, what do you think was important to her?
- Listening to your angry voice, what do you think her experience was?
- How would you react to a problem solving approach from x's side?

Where a team leader has to mediate between conflicting team members, a useful tool is that of triadic questions. In triadic questioning, the person being addressed is not included, so the coachee is enabled to become a neutral observer.

- When x and y stop communicating how does z react?
- Does he gets involved or stay out of it?

These might be useful questions to help the coachee to understand 'the system' and to see 'the bigger picture', that means they realise who else is involved in the conflict,

who agrees, who disagrees and who profits because of the conflict.

Hypothetical questions

When it comes to hypothetical questions, the types of hypothetical questions most often used in the coaching process are probably the following three:

Unexpected context-change questions

People often get themselves locked into seeing certain events from one perspective and do not see any other behavioural options. Questions to explore opposite content, context or meaning (Tomm, 1987) might be helpful to enable the coachee to entertain other perspectives. Coming back to our example of conflict in the workplace, helpful questions might be:

- When is the conflict not present?
- How would the world look, if the conflict had gone? What would be different?
- How would you notice?
- If the situation changes, what do you not want to change?

Embedded-suggestion questions

An unintended effect of questions can be that, the more open a question is, the less 'detailed' information the coaching psychologist gets. Embedded-suggestion questions encourage the coachee to be more specific. The coaching psychologist can 'include some specific content that points in a direction he or she considers potentially fruitful' (Tomm, p.177). The coaching psychologist needs to be aware by using embedded-suggestion questions that they become more directive and dominant. Nevertheless, if good rapport is sustained, embedded-suggestion questions can help the client to find alternative solutions. For example:

- If, instead of complaining to your colleagues you simply told your boss that you cannot read her handwriting and a short e-mail would be more efficient, what would she do?
- If you tell her that you need sometimes up to 30 minutes to read her hand-

writing, would she be more likely to accept that she send you the information via e-mail?

Normative-comparison questions

These questions help to define the position of the coachee in comparison to his peer-group. For example, a very ambitious young team-leader who wants to 'be perfect' and is never satisfied with his results, might realise by these questions, that they are already doing a very good job and his ambition is not appropriate. Questions to ask of a role model and how this model behaves are:

- Do you think you meet more often with your team members or less often than other team leaders?
- Do you know a project leader who finishes his projects in time without working additional hours? What does he do?
- Think of someone who is a good leader. What does he/she do? What is different to your performance?

Case examples

The following case examples show how different kinds of questions asked at different levels facilitate the coaching process.

Case study 1

Gerlinde is a senior consultant in a global consultancy company. The reason for the recommendation of coaching psychology was that in her appraisal she was told that she does not come across as mature enough with senior partners and clients. Valued because of her potential and competence, the company suggested coaching and agreed to pay for it.

In our first meeting, I asked a lot of lineal questions to find out about her background, her work experience and her reaction to the feedback she got. I found out that, because of her personal situation (she lives with her husband in Switzerland) she was not based in the main office of the company in Germany and, therefore, did not have high

visibility with senior partners in the firm. On the few occasions she met with them, she felt under pressure to perform really well, which made her behaviour stiff and insecure.

We discussed the situation and I used circular questions like 'What do you think the senior partner expects from you', strategic questions like 'What would happen if you stopped trying to make a mature and professional impression when you meet the senior partners in informal settings and be yourself and relax?' and a reflexive question 'If your colleagues in Switzerland whom you work much closely with could observe you while you try to impress senior German partners, what would they think?'. I then discovered that Gerlinde had certain beliefs about what the senior partners think about her which made her insecure.

Her main concern was that she was female and came from Eastern Germany where she studied before the re-unification. She was convinced that the mainly male, in Western Germany, UK or US-educated partners believed that she was in the company mainly for diversity reasons and not for her competence or her university degrees. In addition, informal settings scared her particularly because she had the feeling she did not have the right tools for small talk and networking. She reacted by getting straight down to business and overloaded the senior partners with detailed information about the cases she worked on. The partners did not consider this to be a very professional or mature approach to senior people in the company and did not believe that she would be able to build a rapport with senior clients.

By looking at the Dilts' model, we worked on different levels. On the environmental level, Gerlinde became aware that even though she lived in Switzerland, she had to spend much more time in the German office to get familiar with the German partners and feel less under pressure by knowing them better. On the behaviour and capability level, we worked out how Gerlinde could build up rapport with the partners by

'pacing'¹ them (Knight, 1995, p.123 ff). We looked at the skills she needed to feel confident in talking to senior partners and how she could transfer positive experiences to new and difficult situations. The change at the beliefs and identity levels was a mixture of new and positive reactions to her different behaviour on the one side and a result of intense self-reflection mainly provoked by reflexive questions on the other side. When I asked her, for example, what she thought senior partners most appreciate about her, she found out that they liked her different way of thinking and approaching problems. It even turned out that, especially with new clients from Eastern Europe, her Eastern German background and the fact that she was a woman was considered as very helpful to build a good relationship with the client.

Gerlinde became much more open to new challenges and realised that often her own prejudices stopped her from being valued as a senior team member.

Case study 2

Gregor was part of a high-potential programme in a global company which ran over two years and involved coaching psychology sessions every six to eight weeks. As he was not getting coaching psychology for a specific purpose, his general expectation of the coaching psychologist was 'to have a sparring partner, who gives me advice on important career decisions.'

When I saw Gregor for the first time, my first impression was one of a smart, confident high-flyer in his late 30s whose career seemed to be running smoothly, but who nevertheless was impatient to make his next career step. In the first minutes of our session, he started complaining about an immense workload without appropriate reward and having no one to delegate to. During the following month, a big change took place in this department and we focused in the coaching sessions on what he really wanted in his job and what

he could do to support the changes so as to make the department more successful. Asking lineal and strategic questions proved to be just the right tool for this. During this restructuring process, Gregor got his own team and no longer reported to his former boss who he never really felt supported him. Gregor clearly benefited from a changing environment allowing him to establish a team he felt supported by.

Nevertheless, soon after the first euphoria Gregor continued complaining about his workload and that he had not no one to delegate to. Looking at the different levels of change, Gregor was convinced that he could (environmental level) and did (behaviour level) delegate. Having attended a leadership programme he also saw himself of knowing what delegation means and how you do it (capability level). Therefore, we looked more at the belief and identity level. By asking reflexive questions, for example, 'How would others value your intention to delegate?', 'What would happen if you did not control the work of the others at all?', Gregor realised different things. He had a picture of himself as a leader who trusts and believes in the team members' potential. However, in the new situation he had not worked together with most of the people in his team before and had no idea about their knowledge and potential. Instead of finding out where they stand and which tasks might be successfully taken over by the individual, he put himself under pressure to delegate as much as possible without knowing if his team member could really do it. At the same time he had a very clear picture that the task had to be performed in a certain way within very high standards. His reaction in this dilemma was that he continued doing the tasks himself and controlled nearly every task in his team. Obviously neither the team nor Gregor were happy with this situation.

Reflexive questions helped him to get an awareness of his dilemma and to look at role

¹ Pacing is an element in rapport building. You can pace people by matching their values, their expectation, their language and even their body-language.

models when he was asked 'Do you know a team leader where the team members work mainly independently? How does this team leader do it? What is the reaction of his team? How do they get on?'. Gregor realised that he needed to give himself and his team some time to get familiar with each other and that the atmosphere of trust he wished to have in his team needs time to grow. In addition, he felt that being more patient with himself and his team made him an even better leader.

Case study 3

Kate was a consultant in a high reputation global professional services company. She was very successful at winning large projects and had excellent relationships with clients. At work, however, her colleagues found her brusque and uncaring and she overloaded administrative staff because she managed time poorly. As Kate wanted to be made a partner and this depended on support from colleagues, it was important for her to improve relationships in the office. At our first meeting, we began with lineal questions about the environment in which Kate worked and how she used her time. It became apparent to her when she described this to me that she knew little about the organisation out of her immediate area and resolved to find out more and report back. I used circular questions linked to the behaviour level like, 'What do you think your colleagues feel about your performance with clients?' and strategic questions like, 'How do you think junior colleagues would react if you offered to mentor them on how to win new projects?' This resulted in Kate deciding that 360 degree feedback interviews would be useful in helping her to understand exactly what colleagues did think about her. She thought she tended to be so focussed on client reactions that she did not pick up sufficiently on feedback from colleagues. Other questions that were helpful in tuning Kate into her impact concerned questions about the beliefs or identity level; such as future-oriented reflexive questions on where she

expected to be in five years' time and how she would then like to be described as a partner of the firm; and observer-perspective reflexive questions on how she comes across, such as 'When you are brusque with your secretary, what do you think others feel about you?' or 'What do you think people at work most like/dislike about you?'

Kate was able to spend a few months gathering data about her environment and her colleagues and meeting with them to discuss feedback about her, with the result that colleagues formed a far better impression of her interest in them and wish to change. She was able to work on her behaviour at work and became a partner later that year.

Conclusions

Tomm points out that questions tend to call for answers and statements tend to provide them (Tomm, 1988, p.2). Therefore, questions are less directive than statements and coaches are actively drawn into a dialogue with the coaching psychologist, become curious about themselves and the organisation and stimulated to think through problems on their own. In this way, the coaching psychologist becomes a facilitator rather than an expert in the developmental journey of coachees. Whilst it is clear that the coaching psychologist's use of systemic questions can help coachees to develop more systemic awareness, the coaching psychologist must also bear in mind that coaches are often chosen by coachees because of their theoretical know-how or because of their management experience. Coachees may be looking for a 'sparring partner' they can share experiences with, get opinions from and can argue with. Coaches may be required to take a position on certain issues to build up a relationship of confidence and trust with coachees. When coachees are asked about their preferences in having a psychologically trained coach, people often mention that they feared having someone who only asks questions in a very hierarchical way and would not show their own 'personality'. It is important for the coaching psychologist to take a position on

issues sometimes, if this is what the coachee needs; however, too many statements in the coaching process can be experienced as directive by the coachee and can provoke resistance. Therefore, a good balance between questions and statements is what a professional coaching psychologist needs to achieve, based on a flexible client-centred approach. This paper has attempted to show how the coaching psychologist can become more effective when asking questions by carefully considering the nature of those questions, their intent and the likely outcome.

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