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Solution-Focused Management

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The Solution-Focused Approach developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg has been well established across many areas of society. In this book, the practical uses of solution-focused work in companies and management are shown. By means of conceptual contributions, as well as many case studies and projects in practice, current developments in Leadership, Marketing and Sales, Project Management, Work Design, Human Resources, Organisational Development and Learning, Training and Coaching, as well as Conflict Management are described. In addition, we also present empirical studies on the effect of solution-focused work in enterprises.

Key words: solution-focused approach, solution-focused management, solution orientation, consulting, coaching, change management

Günter Lueger looks for opportunities to do things in management differently. He specialises in designing and redesigning management instruments and paper work in companies in a solution-focused way. Innovations include Solution Focused Rating (SFR) and Solution-focused Management Instruments, like FMT, which allow more appreciative assessments and analysis in organisations (www.solutionmanagement.net, www.fit-management.at).

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Volume 1

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Preface

In May 2006, the "Solutions in Organisations Linkup (SOL) conference" took place for the fifth time in Vienna, after the Bristol Group initiated the first event back in 2002. Since then, this international conference has evolved into the annual main event of the worldwide network for academics, consultants, trainers and managers, who base their work on the solution focused approach by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. Today this network is established and promotes further developments in this field. More about the SOL-network can be found on the internet at www.solworld.org

The Conference was organised by the editors together with Kathrin Bauer, Elisabeth Kamenicky, Erika Krenn, Thomas Lenz, Doris and Wolfgang Regele, Martina Scheinecker and the SOL-steering group. For the first time, the focus of this annual event was not only on the consultancy key aspects, but also on a wide range of applications within solution-focused procedures for managers.

The contributions in this book are the result of the work at the conference and show impressively the communities' resources and the sophisticated applications of solution-focused work for organisations. You will find in this book conceptual basics of the Solution Focused Approach and case studies about leadership, marketing and sales, human resource management, project management, organisational consulting, coaching, as well as conflict management. Readers of this book will find a rich source of ideas and examples on how to put them into action from over 60 contributors, who share their experience of working using solution-focused principles.

In this volume also the academic aspect and further developments of the solution focused approach can be found. Both the contributions in the chapter on "Principles" and also the different articles on empirical research projects show the interesting and promising results of the solution focused approach's impact on productivity within organisations.

In September 2005, Steve de Shazer, one of the most important founders of the approach, died unexpectedly. Therfore, the conference was dedicated to him and his work. Many pioneers and colleagues agreed to attend this conference and to appreciate his manifold and at the same time concise opus. The content and also the quality of the contributions in this book are, from our perspective, the best proof for the response his work has found all over the world. The ideas' potential is still far away from being fully tapped and many contributions in this book show possibilities for further developments of the "Solution-Focused Management Approach".

Günter Lueger and Hans-Peter Korn, Vienna 2006

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Solution-Focused Management: Towards a Theory of Positive Differences

Keywords: solution-focused principles, solution-focused techniques, well-formed goals, exceptions, miracle question, scaling, solution-focused attitudes, theory, patterns, management fields

Summary

This article summarises the core elements of the solution-focused approach, which have their origin in a psychotherapeutic context. First, a model is developed that works out the central pattern of the solution-focused approach, which in the author's opinion is the focusing on positive differences. All principles, attitudes and techniques of the solution-focused approach centre on the production of information, which is different if it is or fits better.

Against this backdrop, the outlines of a solution-Focused Management-approach are developed. Thus, the specific options for using and implementing the "solution-focused approach" are to be made easier in respect of the classic management functions for enterprises that currently are situated in settings "close to consulting".

A concept spreads in the world of consulting and management

The "solution-focused approach" was developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues at the BFTC in Milwaukee. This concept, also originally known as "brief consulting", has now entered wide reaches of our society and is currently spreading through the areas of consulting and management. Since the first world conference on "Solution-Focused Practise in Organisations" 2002 in Bristol (organised by the Bristol Group), there has been a world-wide integration and discussion process (see www.solworld.org). For instance, a large number of publications referring to a rich variety of application projects for enterprises can now be observed (see e.g. Aoki 2005, Berg/Szabo 2005, McKergow/Clarke 2005, Jackson/McKergow 2002, Furman 2004). Originally these ideas mainly concerned coaching and team development issues (see Maier 2005, Sharry 2004), but now solution-focused work is clearly spreading into broader areas of management, such as HRM, Marketing, Project Management, and many more (see the contributions to this volume).

This extended reach is possibly connected with the increase in problem-solving pressure on enterprises. The focus of solution-focused management is on the difference between problem and solution, and this difference arguably keeps enterprises and employees equally busy. In addition, the efficiency potential of brief consulting is also interesting for decision makers in enterprises, as solution-focused projects involve much less effort in developing design measures (see Clarke/McKergow 2007).

One of the reasons the solution-focused approach is so attractive for enterprises is the fact that it touches upon central questions and aspects of management as well as the success of an enterprise and its staff. This enormous potential for business practice and management research exists, as the following questions can be answered:

- What can safeguard the success and the survival of enterprises, teams and individual employees and how is it done?
- How can strengths and resources, and thus core competencies, be found and optimised throughout the enterprise?
- What can be done to design the manifold changes in an enterprise more efficiently?
- How can, in times of dwindling resources, measures in enterprises be worked out simply and more efficiently?
- And last but not least: How can solutions be found more simple?

In my opinion, these opportunities have not been made explicit enough in the discussion of solution-focused work. Of course, these questions are also discussed in other management and consulting concepts and some answers can be found. Solution-focused work, however, offers different and new answers and especially a new quality by combining the individual core elements. First empirical studies already show positive economic effects (see the chapter on “Research” in this volume).

Towards a Theory of Positive Differences

Solution-focused work in enterprises today comprises a broad range of principles, methods and instruments. Techniques such as miracle question, exceptions, well formed goals, simplicity and many more are available and have successfully been tested in business practice. Most of these approaches were originally developed in therapy, which is the reason why solution-focused work has been most widely spread in similar settings (coaching and consulting). Another reason for this is that the approach concentrates on questioning techniques (it is no coincidence the seminal volume by Peter de Jong and Insoo Kim Berg is called "Interviewing for solutions”) or is concerned with questions regarding the design of consulting settings. Without further development, the use in classic management areas and with employees would be limited, as many tasks in every-day work involve not so much question techniques, but other activities, such as entering information, motivating, following objectives, developing concepts, using tools etc.

For this reason, a conceptual framework of solution-focused work is helpful that can facilitate the application for other tasks in management and enterprise.

This framework will now be outlined by:

- Developing a theoretically founded pattern from the already existing principles, techniques and attitudes
- Formulating a sketch for a theory of solution-focused management on this basis
- And briefly presenting, by means of examples taken from different functional areas of management, new starting points for less discussed areas of application, such as motivation, information transfer, marketing etc.

As we concentrate on the concept of focusing positive differences as the linking pattern, the term “theory of positive differences” suggests itself.

The Principle of “Finding Differences” – what is different when it works?

One of the most important core elements of the solution-focused approach is the focus on “what is different when it is better?" All techniques of this approach (such as asking about exceptions, Future Perfect...), summarised below, point at the differences and the elements that function (see de Shazer 1988 pp.2). And it is exactly at this point where we can see why the expression “solution-focused approach” is justified. Every effort is taken to make all persons involved in solving the problem consistently focus their activities on developing information that is relevant to the solution and directed at positive differences, which is called “solution talk”. And, thus, *focusing on positive differences* is at the centre of this approach.

Of course, every practitioner knows that in every-day work, analysing the negative differences often become a main issue. Here people try to find out what happens if things do not work – an approach known as “problem talk”. The side effects of analysing negative differences are well known: The question “whose fault is it” will be discussed and increases the likelihood of conflict, energy for making changes gets lost and demotivation spreads, when the details of non-functioning are discussed.

Focusing on differences is also helpful with a phenomenon that often makes finding solutions more difficult: employees describing problems presuppose that these problems are constant, also over time (which reduces any hope for change). Thus, the first step in developing incremental changes is in most cases to "make the problem more liquid" and so to perceive the differences mentioned before (de Shazer 1988, pp. 52). In this way the number of options for action increases and, after all, it is specific actions that are also a central element of the solution-focused approach.

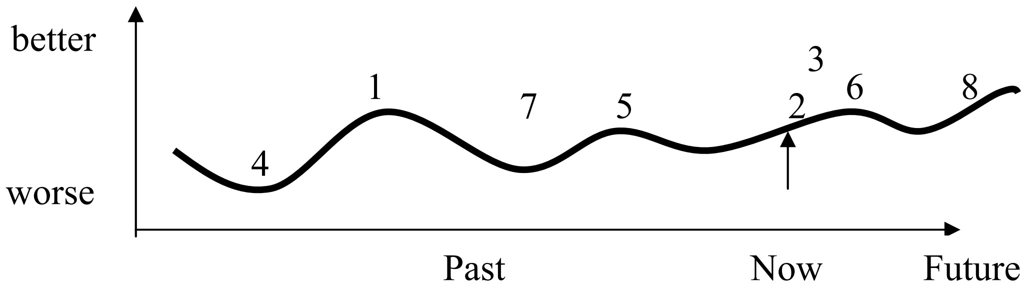

Figure 1: The pattern of finding "positive differences" of solution-focused techniques

The many specific techniques of the solution-focused approach (see deJong/Berg 2002, Mahlberg/Sjöblom 2005) clearly show this pattern of focusing on positive differences (the numbers relating to the individual techniques can be found in figure 1 and exemplify when particular techniques can show positive differences during the problem-solving process):

- *1. Exceptions*: By asking about exceptions from the problem, specific information is identified, which happens at those times the problem inexplicably does not, or only slightly, show. In this way, positive differences from the past referring to the problem can be detected.
- *2. Miracle Question:* This "universal technique" for specifying utopias (however, the miracle question is no miracle) or other types such as "Future Perfect" focus on specific details, from which persons involved will see that the problem has miraculously disappeared. The great advantage of this technique is that the image of a desirable and often even feasible future can be developed without necessarily any reason in the past. Again, specific details of positive differences can be seen.
- *3. Scaling:* Today, scalings are used in many different ways, mostly in the form of a scale from 0 (worst state of the problem) to 10 (problem solved). The game with differences here is very colourful, but the positive difference is always the focal point (e.g. where specifically will you first see that you have moved from "5" to "6"). Scalings more or less resemble the "ladders" in the game with differences (de Shazer 1994).
- *4. Coping questions*: These also focus on positive differences, by finding out what people do in order to avoid things getting worse. Even in a very difficult situation, employees take actions to avoid things getting worse – and that is a positive difference.
- *5. "Presession Change":* This technique refers to an approach, where clients, e.g. at the first coaching session, are asked whether there have been any improvements in the meantime. Thus the focus is on those things that show positive change even before the start of the problem-solving process.
- *6. The development of "well formed goals":* Developing these refers to specific, small steps described in specific ways of behaviour, in order to start something

better or new (and not to end something problematic). Of course, the focus is on positive differences again.

- *7. "Doing something instead"* When solving problems, there is often talk of what should *not* be or should *not* happen. The technique used here is focusing on the alternative ("what should happen instead").
- *8. "Tasks"*: Both "observation tasks" and "behavioral tasks" (deJong/Berg 2002, pp110) include either observing positive differences or a specific activity in a positive direction (even if the person concerned just pretends things are better).

Therefore, in my opinion, the pattern of focusing on positive differences is present in all techniques described (and several more techniques, such as Reframing could be mentioned here). Particularly impressive is the number and variety of techniques, which provide an excellent basis for applications in management. It also becomes clear that the solution-focused approach is a continuous, resource-oriented approach that is possibly one of the most consistent concepts of this kind.

One important effect of focusing on positive differences is also the appreciation inherently linked with this approach. If, when dealing with positive differences, e.g. meetings are analysed that produced better results, or successful product launches are analysed more closely, the efforts and little successes of those involved are automatically appreciated. The solution-focused approach constantly stresses hat appreciation is not a technique, but a basic attitude. Here it becomes apparent why this sustained effect keeps turning up throughout the approach: it is "built in" with the central principle of focusing on positive differences.

None of these techniques involve analysing the problem and the things that do not work. And so it is much less likely that problem-solving leads to frustration, anger, paralysis and powerlessness. All phenomena every practitioner knows well from meetings, workshops, presentations etc., and which are reduced by consistently focusing on information relevant to the solution. As an aside it should be mentioned that solutions are not directly asked for, which is very common in the world of management ("What is the solution mister X to win back the customer?). Exactly this question often results in awkward silence. It is the indirect focusing on positive differences and objectives (de Shazer 1988, p. 5), not making a demand for solutions, which makes this possible.

One specific aspect of the approach regarding positive differences has only been mentioned in passing: concentrating on SMALL positive differences. This raises the probability that relevant information is found or created and, of course, also the motivation for starting step-by-step changes, as smaller steps are much more likely to be implemented. Focusing on smaller positive differences thus simplifies the approach. This simplicity is also a basic principle of the solution-focused approach ("keep things as simple as possible – but no simpler" A. Einstein).

Positive differences are not just focused on, they are also central on the level of activities. It is mostly the meta-rules (see Sparrer 2002, pp.76) of the solution-focused approach that are helpful here:

“If it works do more of it”

“If it does not work do something different”

The first rule clearly implies a specific, more intensive use of resources (which as a rule involves little additional cost). "Amplifying what works" is an important basic attitude in solution-focused work, which is made use of frequently. The second principle, by "doing something different" increases the probability – without needing to know the answer – that something else and thus better can happen. In this way, a problematic pattern might be broken.

The third meta-rule is slightly different in nature and should also be mentioned here: “if it works don't fix it”. Strictly speaking, this principle looks slightly paradox, why indeed should we fix something that is not broken? In every-day business life, however, it is in my opinion more and more the case that employees and especially managers start changing a lot of things and in doing so also change concepts that used to work (often causing unfavourable side effects). Therefore, this principle is often helpful – especially in view of an economical use of resources.

The question of "doing things" and taking action, however, is not just here, but in many examples an important aspect (see the various examples also in this volume). This is yet another argument in favour of the usability of this concept for business practice.

Thus, the central pattern of the techniques of the solution-focused approach can be fittingly described as focusing on the small positive differences and translating this into actions. But what does this difference of better/worse that is so often brought up actually refer to? This leads us to another important aspect of solution-focused work: the interactional view and thus taking into consideration of interdependencies, which enables a more holistic approach.

The Interactional View

An important core element of solution-focused work is the interactional view (see deJong/Berg 2002, p.70), which is expressed in the commonly quoted principle that “every action is interaction” (Jackson/McKergow 2002, pp.43). When working out objectives and solutions, the focus is always put on interdependencies, i.e. the interplay between employees and the work situation/environment. If, for instance, a salesperson considers doing something differently, a common question in the solution-focused approach is "what will the customers do differently, how will they react?" In this manner, it is the fit that is always supported, with the literature mainly focusing on the fit between people and, in my opinion, focusing on the interdependencies between people and situational factors would be an important development (and from a management perspective particularly the fit between the enterprise and the relevant environment).

In combination with this principle, the orientation towards positive differences described above turns into an approach which specifically and in detail finds out what is different when it fits better (deShazer 1994, S 121ff.).

This interactional view thus resembles the results of management research: achieving success and satisfaction for enterprises, teams and employees is always the result of a good fit and the most important starting point for measures can be found in the question “does it fit?” (see Osterloh/Frost 1996, Lueger 1996). Efficiency and effectiveness in an enterprise are closely linked with this question (see Osterloh/Frost 1996, p. 156).

On the level of the individual employee, the fit between the workplace and the employee's characteristics is important. There is no such thing as a gut/bad employee or workplace, but one that fits or does not fit. Even when an employee thinks his dissatisfaction and reduced performance potential are related with the dynamic changes, it is most often the fact that the dynamic change acts together with his personal resources. Often, employees state that the situation has caused a problem and are not (fully) aware of the importance of the "fit". Here it is helpful to "liquidify" people's positions by adopting an “interactional view”.

At the same time, for the success of a team (see Lueger 1996) and organisational units it is not so much the sole focus on team or environment, but again the “interactional view” (between team members and also between the team and the context) that counts.

For the management and control of enterprises on a strategic and operational level, the question "does it fit?" is equally central. If an enterprise, for instance, encounters a crisis, this crisis is a misfit between the enterprise and the relevant environment (often the market and customers' expectations). Once the crisis has been overcome, misfits have as a rule been reduced and a better fit has been achieved (e.g. by changes in the distribution system or product launches).

With this interactional view it is also easy to create a link between problem and solution, between fit and misfit, and I believe it is clear to see what employees and enterprises want to achieve with their solutions (see Schmidt 2004). What managers and employees in business practice call a "problem" is, as a rule, a misfit (even though it is commonly only one side of the coin that at first is under scrutiny, such as the market, the difficult colleagues etc.). And what is called a solution in practice, is a better coordination of the relevant aspects, even if it is just a small reduction in misfits.

I believe that this constitutes an important starting point for further projects of solution-focused work, management practice and also management research.

The fit of enterprise or employee and the context in most cases does not just touch upon two, but many more aspects. If, for instance, someone describes the way he or she organises him/herself as a problem, there is usually not just a misfit between personal time management and work intensity, but there are often a great number of other relevant aspects, such as ambiguities, a lack of support from colleagues, coordination with the family etc. In most cases, these interdependencies are very complex and any attempts to explain these are, by their very nature, incomplete. Solution-focused work approaches the problem-solving process in a very different way. While most management concepts take the question of where and why a problem originates to be central, here the problem is practically left aside. All efforts are focused on construing the "solution" and on describing as many details as possible regarding what is different when it is better. It is essential to understand the solution rather than the problem (see Lueger 2006).

By using this approach, it generally turns out that information regarding the solution is not the opposite of the problem, but simply shows another quality. Above all, however, focusing on what works or should be better results in a significantly higher willingness to accept change.

Nevertheless, problems or misfits are a topic even with this approach (“to be solution-focused does not mean to be problem-phobic”). Yet making the problem an issue mainly serves to create a connection with the person describing the problem, to create a platform (Jackson/McKergow 2002) and not so much to create a solution. In doing so, the use of particular concepts ("oh, there's a mismatch here", whenever an employee sees his own failure as the problem) can already provide relief, as the number of potential starting points is raised (person and situation) and new possibilities are created.

The aspect of using a different language (“language creates reality”) by using terms focusing on fits and misfits is also in line with another important principle of solution-focused work: change something not someone”.

Commonly messages in an enterprise are phrased in such a way, as to imply it is the employee who should change (if often indirectly, such as “Mister X, don't you want to attend a communication seminar?). Making interdependencies an issue is just one example of “something should change”. The possible applications are manifold by focusing on e.g. cooperation (instead of the ability to work in a team), and the flow of information (instead of communicative behaviour) or on things like processes, outcome and the like.

This takes us to the next item, language and meaning and the question, how in an enterprise, or its sub-units, agreement can be achieved on what should be done for things to work better.

Social Construction of Meaning

Solution-focused work is considered to be a constructivist approach. The central element of the approach is always how a person describing a problem (or rather telling a story they refer to as a problem) sees things or constructs reality. Based on this individually construed reality, The question of giving meaning is clearly important, that is "who in an enterprise decides what the solution is?".

One basic attitude of solution-focused work is the principle that "the client is the expert", which puts the responsibility for giving meaning with the person concerned, i.e. the employee. In all those cases where an individual looks for an individual solution (such as with coaching) this question is easily answered.

In enterprises, on the other hand, this setting rarely occurs in every-day work situations. Even in a conversation between an employee and his/her superior there is a clash between two different constructions of reality. In meetings of more persons, the number of points of view increases and regarding the question about an enterprise's direction, complexity is accordingly high. And every employee knows from their own experience that the meaning of a phenomenon (such as there are many rules for information exchange) has very different meanings in different areas of an enterprise. Realities in an enterprise are always socially construed and their meaning is derived from context (Kergen 1999) and there's a constant challenge to socially validate reality (Weik 1979) in enterprises. This refers to the development of consensual areas and thus the clarity what is now valid.

Exactly this establishment of consensual areas is facilitated by the solution-focused approach and focusing on positive differences. First, things with positive connotations, such as small successes or things that work are more accessible for other people. Second, by working out differences and looking for several positive differences (“What else?)” the number of options is increased, which also facilitates the development of a mutually acceptable solution.

Naturally, coordinating consensual areas concerning the development of solutions is, particularly with many points of view in groups or larger units of an enterprise, not without obstacles. But it is getting simpler and thus follows another principle of solution-focused work: “it is simple but not easy”.

Solution-Focused Management

How can the outlines of such a solution-focused management-approach be described, which enables solution-focused work not just in settings "close to consulting", but in all functional areas of management?

Against the backdrop of the concept developed here, solution-focused management can be seen as a:

– a concept for control in enterprises that includes a consistent focusing on those aspects that resemble small positive differences (at the level of the individual employee, in groups and the whole enterprise),
– with these differences mainly referring to those aspects that fit better
– thus taking measures to get more out of the things that work and to do things differently when they don't work
– finally, observing and screening which of these measures and activities led to positive differences etc.

It can be assumed that by implementing such a concept, the favourable effects from the consulting-oriented experiences with solution-focused work so far can also be transferred to many settings of every-day management. The following effects are particularly likely:

– Establishing and developing a culture of appreciation by focusing on positive differences, which builds trust
– Using resources and strengths of company-wide knowledge about what works well
– Focusing on "doing" and “something” such as objectives
– A holistic view through taking into account interdependencies and the question of coordination
– Focusing on few but essential things (“Simplicity”)

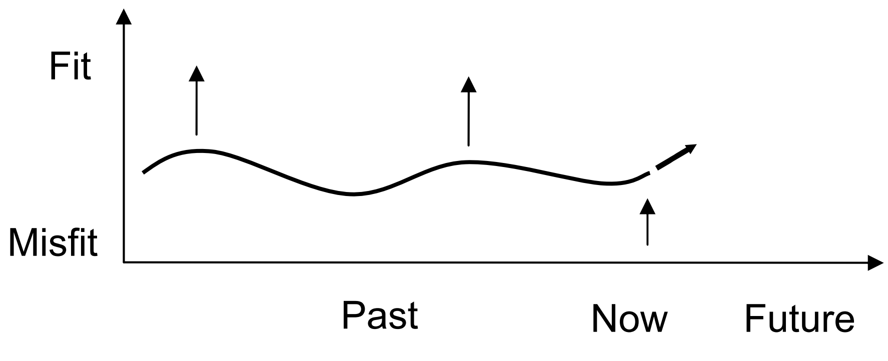

Figure 2: Dynamic development towards more fits and solutions

When using the approach described, it can be assumed that a positive development towards a better state is achieved: thus, mainly a better fit of the enterprise with the markets/environment, but also a more favourable fit within the enterprise is likely. Like at the start of a "balloon", by focusing on positive differences, the balloon is filled with "energy" and this creates an upwards development. One important challenge in this context is a solution-focused design of management instruments and the "paperwork" in enterprises. If positive differences are also reflected in instruments and processes, this would quickly lead to a broader effect in enterprises.

Interestingly, similar aspects as those mentioned above are increasingly mentioned in the discussion of management concepts. Especially practice-oriented concepts (see e.g. Malik 2001) and resource-oriented management concepts (Hamel/Prahalad 1994) show a similar leaning.

In my opinion, against this background there are new and further opportunities of using solution-focused management that will be outlined briefly now (this book, after all, contains a multitude of examples for possible use).

One important task in an enterprise is to pass on information in connection with presentations or speeches, where the setting is one of one-way communication. Following the "theory of positive differences", that information should be foregrounded that makes clear what is different when things work better. If the managing director wants to motivate the assembled employees towards tackling the concept of "quality", he can, for example, present the following aspects:

- Specific details on where quality works well in the enterprise
- How people can make out that quality develops positively
- What is different if quality fits well
- What can be intensified or done more often, with a focus on small steps certainly being helpful etc.

It is not uncommon in business life to find a different approach in such cases: detailed descriptions of situations where they quality is not right (which employees see as a degradation of their efforts), details about problems such as statistics on customer complaints, references to the competitors etc.

The potential applications for passing on information, however, in the author's opinion also include e-mails. Against the backdrop of focusing on positive differences, an e-mail can be written in a much more solution-focused manner. The elements mentioned here show that it is not just questioning techniques but also statements and messages that can be orientate towards positive differences.

Another potential use can be found in the area of "motivation in enterprises". Based on the concept described, the approach of a superior would focus on finding out about differences in motivation. The most important question with motivational problems is not an attempt at explaining why a person is demotivated (which is a very popular and oft-discussed question round the water cooler), but what is different if a person is a little bit more motivated. A superior would observe exactly these situations more closely, gather information and, in conversation with the employee, work out together what is different when things works better (the needs of the employee and the characteristics of the work situation). If the superior takes an action resulting in a higher commitment of the employee, he will look for opportunities to do more of the same.

The rest of this book contains a multitude of conceptional ideas and especially examples, case studies and projects involving solution-focused work in enterprises. In my opinion, they also follow the pattern of finding and making use of positive differences. These applications have been proven in practice and cover the areas of leadership, marketing and sales, project management, work design, human resources, organisational development and learning, training and coaching, as well as conflict management.

It would be gratifying if you, dear reader, find inspiration here for applying this approach in your enterprise. At this point a final principle of solution-focused work is to be mentioned that is important in this context: “every case is different”. It is essential to develop the die positive differences in a particular context, that is your enterprise, and so these projects do not provide recipes for other contexts. They definitely do provide ideas for new approaches though and we sincerely hope they will be of use for you.

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Principles of Solution-Focused Work in Management and Organisations

Mark McKergow

Steve de Shazer – a Different Kind of Cleverness

I first met Steve in 1994 at the Interaction View conference in Palo Alto, California. Although I did not know it at the time, this was a milestone event in the development of interactional and systemic ideas – one of the few times where the Mental Research Institute group (Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Dick Fisch amongst them) came together with the Solution-Focused therapy crowd led by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg.

Steve and Insoo had trained at MRI two decades earlier, and had introduced new subtleties and simplicity into the MRI model – improvements, as they saw it. However, the link between the two centres was maintained by Steve's relationship with John Weakland, his supervisor and mentor.

I next met Steve in London. My colleague Harry Norman had approached him for an interview, which we finally managed to do in London in 1995. I only discovered later that he was noted for not giving interviews, and that this was a great privilege. Steve was a keen brewer and beer drinker, and Harry had managed to interest him in sampling some 'medieval beer', brewed in tiny quantities to authentic recipes. This may have been the key to our success!

In the week before the interview Steve was leading a training in Solution-Focused Therapy, with a large audience (well over 100 people). Steve ambled onto the stage with a microphone, exhaled deeply as he always did before starting, and said…"So.. you'd better ask me some questions". A shiver went around the room. Surely he was the expert, and we wanted to be told what to do. Yet here he was, refusing to tell us. There was a silence.

"Does it work with alcoholics?", came a question from the floor. "I don't know. Next question." "Does it work with personality disorders?" "I don't know. Next question." Several more diagnoses were mentioned, and each time the answer was the same – "I don't know".

I was amazed and disturbed. Here I was, keen to find out more about this fantastic approach to change, and the star performer was telling me he didn't know if it worked with alcoholics. What was going on? My discomfort was clearly shared by other audience members - after a while, some started to leave.

"Can I see you ask the Miracle Question?" asked someone. Steve brightened up visibly. "Ah! Yes, I'm sure I can do that. Thanks for asking." We relaxed a little – at least he was going to do something.

As the session went on, I reflected on Steve's remarks of "I don't know". Surely this approach did work with many kinds of patient? Were there not studies to prove it? I came to realise that Steve, of course, knew all this perfectly well. Actually, he was showing us how to do Solution-Focused therapy in that moment, engaging what I have to come call his ‘different kind of cleverness’.

In order to answer the apparently simple question “Does it work with alcoholics?”, one must accept two presuppositions. Firstly, there is such a thing as an alcoholic. And secondly, that it (the treatment in question) is replicable by anyone who applies it.

Let’s look at the first one first – is there such a thing as an alcoholic? Clearly the word is used as if there was, but SF work is not based on diagnosis – the client’s complaint is not relevant in determining what they want (the ‘solution’ in Solution Focus) and times when that happens already. Steve’s work was part of the tradition that questions the value of diagnosis in any case, and even if an accurate assessment of the condition could be made, each one would want something different – leading to a course for treatment which would vary in each case. There was therefore no value in even considering whether the client was an ‘alcoholic’ or not. Part of his ‘I don’t know’ was a rejection of this as a relevant term in his work.

The other presupposition is in the ‘Does it work’ element. ‘Does it work?’ implies that ‘it’ is working, rather than someone is acting skilfully to make something happen. We might say of a piano, ‘Does it work?’ – meaning that if someone hits the notes, then the relevant sounds will emerge. It doesn’t matter who is hitting the notes, the sounds will emerge. In SF work, solutions are constructed in conversation, which is an art as well as a science. To ask if SF therapy works is therefore to ask not if the piano works, but instead to ask if piano-playing ‘works’. This is not a sensible question – pianos can be made to sound beautiful with skill, but someone without the skill could scarcely claim that playing the piano didn’t work – just that they were not yet individually skilful enough.

A question which may have had a better reaction from Steve was “Have you got successful outcomes with clients who want to drink less?” In this case, the question is about his own experience, and related to a client group defined in terms of what they wanted. The distinctions between this and ‘Does it work with alcoholics?’ are, for me, at the heart of SF practice. Maybe Steve’s legacy to us is to stop trying to answer big questions and focus instead on the tiny micro-construction of conversations which build solutions.

Gale Miller

Constructing the Roots of Solution-Focused Practices

Keywords: Both/And Practitioner, Theory, Complex Response Processes, Self-Organizing Conversation, Paradox, Enabling Constraint, Control, Ethical Leadership, Consultants as Teachers, Contexts of Reflection.

Summary

I construct the roots of solution-focused practices and ideas by considering the compatibilities between the solution-focused and the complex response processes approaches to organizational life. My purpose is to expand the horizons of solution-focused practitioners' orientations to organizational consulting. I discuss the concept of self-organizing conversation, which is oriented towards paradox and uncertainty in organizational processes and relationships. Specifically, I discuss the paradox of enabling constraints, paradox of control and the uncertainties of ethical leadership in organizations. I conclude by briefly noting the implications of the essay for defining solution-focused consultants' relationships with their organizational clients.

This essay builds on the metaphor of a tree, which includes a trunk, branches and roots. The trunk is the center of the tree and it connects the tree's branches with its roots. The trunk and branches are easily observable to passers by, whereas the roots are usually hidden below the ground. We could, of course, observe the roots by digging up the tree but that risks doing damage to the tree. So, most of the time we content ourselves with only imagining what trees' roots look like and what the roots connect trees to. This essay is such an imaginative project. I discuss some possible connections between solution-focused ideas and practices, and a related approach to organizational change.

I offer no evidence for my claims. How could I? I am writing about connections that I have never seen and that may only exist in my imagination. Nonetheless, I see this exercise as a useful way of moving discussions of solution-focused ideas and practices away from the past and toward the future that will be different than the past and present. I challenge solution-focused practitioners to take seriously their assumption that change is an ever present aspect of life. Just as these practitioners encourage their clients to actively and imaginatively shape the direction of change in the clients' lives, so I encourage the practitioners to do the same for themselves.

I use this essay to celebrate the accomplishments of Steve de Shazer and other creators of the solution-focused approach, many of whom are members of this organization. I admit that my way of celebrating is different than other approaches that focus on the observable branches of solution-focused practices and ideas. The branches connect with Wittgensteinian philosophy, Ericksonian and strategic therapies and other recognized influences on the work of early solution-focused brief therapists. I treat the solution-focused approach as a social invention occurring within a particular historical environment, one that early solution-focused brief therapists shared with other people working on related projects around the world. The solution-focused approach is a simultaneous invention with the other complementary inventions that also challenged conventional wisdom in the late 20^{th} and early 21^{st} centuries. These inventions are the roots of solution-focused practices for me.

Becoming a both/and practitioner

An important theme within solution-focused discourse involves linking concepts, choices and actions that others treat as separate, distinct and irreconcilable. Solution-focused practitioners often characterize this theme as adopting a "both/and" orientation and they contrast it with an "either/or" approach. These practitioners further explain that the both/and approach allows for a wider range of possibilities in constructing solutions and enhances clients' creativity in initiating change. This theme is especially evident in the teachings and writings of solution-focused practitioners that focus on interactional techniques intended to help clients adopt both/and orientations to their lives.

But there is another side to the both/and orientation that is largely ignored by solution-focused practitioners. It involves the potential of developing a both/and orientation that takes account and even appreciates the paradoxes and uncertainties of social life and relationships. This side of the both/and orientation acknowledges that life includes contradictions that are not resolvable in any final sense and that the future is unknowable. Nonetheless, we must still try to influence the direction of our lives. This side of the both/and orientation encourages people to become comfortable with the paradoxes and uncertainties of life by learning to live with and appreciate them.

I believe that solution-focused consultants neglect of this aspect of the both/and theme is unfortunate. It limits what is possible in conversations between the practitioners and their organizational clients. For example, I noticed this limitation in my conversations with the person who replaced me as head of my department at my university. This mid-level administrative position is filled with paradox and uncertainties created at all levels of the university hierarchy. We found that our conversations about techniques and strategies were inadequate for our purposes. We also needed a theoretical context for interpreting paradoxical and uncertain situations.

I realize that many solution-focused practitioners are skeptical about theories, even though many embrace Wittgensteinian theory and social constructionism. As I see it, the problem is that solution-focused practitioners tend to use the word theory in a very restricted way. They use it to characterize structural approaches that analyze the hidden underlying causes and conditions of problems. But this word is also used to refer to shared assumptions, shared use of language, and shared orientations. Using this definition of theory, solution-focused practice is informed by theory.

This definition also points to how solution-focused practitioners use the word theory to construct either/or situations in which they must choose between being solution-focused or being theorists. One aspect of becoming a both/and practitioner, then, involves rejecting this social construction and replacing it with something new. This is where other perspectives on organizational life can be useful to solution-focused practitioners. For me, the writings of Ralph Stacey (2001) and his collaborators (José Fonseca (2002), Douglas Griffin (2002), Patricia Shaw (2002), Philip J. Streatfield (2001)) on complex responses processes form a useful starting point for talking about the implications of a both/and orientation that takes account of and appreciates paradox and uncertainty.

C*omple*x response processes

The term "complex response processes" refers to activities that are easily observable and are often experienced as simple. It deals with how people in social interaction construct the future. This is a never ending process that is always a potential source of change through social interaction. The perspective of complex response processes is a sociological view that treats persons and their knowledge as emergent in social interactions and relationships. It challenges the dominant Western psychological concept of the person as separate and distinct from others. Proponents of this perspective also challenge other popular ideas. For example, they reject the idea that knowledge is a "thing" that individuals possess in their heads. Rather, these theorists treat knowledge as socially constructed and shared within social interactions.

These challenges are related to the theorists' rejection of the idea that organizations are systems. Instead, they define organizations as sites of self-organizing conversations. This term calls attention to how conversing is a process of organizing people, activities and meanings (Shaw, 2002) Self-organizing conversations cannot be controlled by any single person, group or organizational plan. They always have the potential of initiating change, although this possibility is not always realized in practice. Participants and observers may experience self-organizing conversations as somewhat disorderly because no one knows exactly where they are going and they often produce unanticipated meanings.

It is within this environment that organization members and consultants can engage the paradoxes of organizational life and relationships. I have already mentioned one of them. It is that simple conversations involve complex response processes of interpretation and negotiation. The complexity of social interaction is increased by the possibility that conversationalists will construct unanticipated meanings that may lead to decisions and actions that then produce unintended consequences. Despite the perils of simple conversations, organization members cannot avoid them. They are a necessary feature of the work done by many organization members and are a major way in which members attempt to influence the future.

I develop the complex response processes perspective in the rest of this section by discussing the paradox of enabling constraint, paradox of control and the uncertainties of ethical leadership in organizations.

Paradox of Enabling Constraint

The concept of self-organizing conversation directs our attention to how social interaction involves making and taking turns at talk. In this way, conversationalists take account of each others' presence and build conversational relationships. Conversation might be envisioned as a dance-like activity in which the partners move together. Sometimes one partner leads and the other partner follows but other times this pattern is reversed. Sometimes dance/conversational partners move apart while continuing to take account of each other and other times they closely coordinate their moves. Partners in dance and conversation may also move back and forth between following recognized rules or scripts and "bending" rules by improvising within their ongoing activities and relationships.

The various moves available to speakers (and dancers) define the paradox of enabling constraint. The paradox turns on how each partner's actions set limits on what others might say or do, but these constraining actions are also enabling because they create new possibilities for conversation. Once again, we see how the complex response processes perspective undermines either/or constructions of social interaction and relationships. It also points to conversational possibilities that solution-focused practitioners seldom talk about. One such issue is power, which is often defined as only constraint but it also involves enabling possibilities. Power is enabling because it is the assertion of personal agency. Through their exercise of power, organization members create changes that constrain and enable others and themselves.

This orientation to power fits with many of the questions asked by solution-focused practitioners. The questions are designed to encourage clients to talk about the possibilities for asserting personal agency to change problematic situations. Solution-focused practitioners also often combine their enabling questions with questions asking clients to assess the probable consequences of different courses of action. The questions invite clients to imagine the future, including the constraints that their assertions of power might create. In this way, solution-focused practitioners foster thoughtful planning and decision-making.

No doubt, many solution-focused practitioners will decide that it is sufficient to continue to ask only these questions. For me, however, it is useful to put these questions in a broader context that includes the concept of enabling constraint. In using this concept, I remind myself and my conversational partners of the complexities associated with our otherwise simple interactions. We are simultaneously agents asserting power within situations and constructors of future conditions that include unintended constraints. Talking about enabling constraints probably does not greatly increase our control over the future. Rather, it helps in anticipating the unpredictability of the future and in seeing the enabling possibilities in constraints encountered in the future.

Paradox of Control

The paradox of control answers the question, “Who is in charge?”[5] The traditional answer to this question is that managers are in charge. Managers are experts at problem-solving and getting people to work together to achieve organizational goals. That is why they are called managers. The traditional answer also defines managers as leaders who understand their organizations’ needs better than others who follow the policies set by managers. As leaders, managers are also accountable for the performances of the people that they lead and for the ethical propriety of their decisions and actions. This is a top-down view of social control in organizations.

Managers and consultants who treat organizations as sites of ongoing self-organizing conversations answer the question of “Who is in charge?” differently. They explain that while managers appear to be in control of their organizational units, their control is exercised within the context of self-organizing conversations in which no one is fully in control. Managers lead by not managing others in traditional ways. They also lead by accepting the paradox that planning for the future is essential to organizational operations and that the plans may never be realized in practice or that they may produce unintended consequences. As Streatfield (2001: 7) states,

For me, management has come to mean living with both sides of the control paradox at the same time. This means acting on the basis of an expectation of an outcome, knowing full well that it is unlikely to materialize, requiring me to be ready to handle the consequences whatever they may be. It involves developing effective ways of handling the anxiety of “not knowing.”

The concept of the paradox of control fits well with aspects of solution-focused practices and assumptions, such as the belief that it is not necessary to fully understand a problem in order to move past it. Awareness of the paradox of control also expands solution-focused practices by orienting them to the anxieties and concerns that organization members may have difficulty stating in direct ways. The paradox of control is one concept within the vocabulary of complex response processes that may be useful to organization members in understanding and articulating their concerns and anxieties. It is also a beginning point for conversations about whether managers are “good enough” leaders and about the limits of their accountability. This approach treats managers as accountable for their facilitation of and participation in self-organizing conversations, not for always having the right answers to organizational problems. Put differently, the paradox of control is a starting point for talking about managerial leadership and ethics, an issue that is at best only implied in solution-focused training and practice.

Uncertainties of Ethical Leadership

Griffin (2002) notes that many discussions about organizational ethics turn on an either/or choice between a traditional definition of ethics as the application of general moral codes to diverse situations and the postmodern stance that emphasizes the situational relativity of ethical choices and behavior. The traditional definition assumes that there are absolute moral standards to which organizational leaders should be held. It also glosses over the many ambiguities and uncertainties associated with applying general moral codes to actual situations. Alternatively, the postmodern approach assumes that the ambiguities and uncertainties of situations are so great that they render general moral codes irrelevant.

Theorists of complex response processes offer a third basis for conversations about ethical leadership. The theorists acknowledge the many uncertainties of organizational leadership but they also treat general moral codes as potentially relevant to organizational ethics. They bring these separate themes together by treating ethical leadership as an aspect of self-organizing conversations, that is, an ethics of participation focused on the details of social interaction and relationships. The details form contexts for talking about the relevance of moral codes for actual situations. Griffin (2002: 213) explains that leaders and ethics emerge together in self-organizing conversations;

Effective leaders tend to be those who have… developed more spontaneity and ability to deal with the on-going purpose and task of interaction. Leaders are individuals who have enhanced capacity for taking the attitudes of the other members of the group. They enhance communication within and between groups.

Solution-focused practitioners are trained in conversational knowledge and skills that are potentially useful in addressing the ethical implications of the small details everyday life. A challenge that theorists of complex response processes pose for solution-focused practitioners is to extend their knowledge and skills to explicitly address ethics as an aspect of leadership in uncertain and paradoxical situations Once again, we come back to how organizations are sites of social interaction and to solution-focused consultants' responsibility to help organization members become more effective leaders by enhancing their conversational skills and sensibilities.

Conclusions

I have already stated that this essay is connected to my practical experiences in organizations. It's usefulness for solution-focused practitioners will probably vary based on their experiences. It is also likely to be related to how they think about their roles as consultants. Implicit in this essay is the assumption that one aspect of organizational consultation is providing clients with interpretive resources for making sense of and dealing with the paradoxes, anxieties and dilemmas of organizational life. I call this teaching. Solution-focused practitioners might use the complex response processes perspective to enhance their teaching activities in two interrelated ways.

First, it is a resource for expanding practitioners' and clients' vocabularies. Solution-focused practitioners have long known that words are more than labels for naming things, they are standpoints for seeing and imagining past, present and future realities. It is unfortunate that these practitioners sometimes allow the rhetoric of minimalism in solution-focused discourse to blind them to the magic of new words in conversations about change. The second way that concern for complex response processes might enhance solution-focused practitioners' teaching involves building social contexts of reflection. The contexts assist solution-focused practitioners and clients in learning from their experiences. This is a major theme in Cheryl Mattingly and Maureen Hayes Fleming's[6] study of how occupational therapists become more proficient. While practical experience is important, all experienced therapists are not equally effective. Mattingly and Fleming (1994: 30) explain that

Experience is not simply doing something. It is doing something combined with reflecting on, or making meaning of, the event. Experience is useful, not because one has lived through it, but because one has made meaning of it.

This research is also relevant to the work of solution-focused practitioners, their clients and to the writing of this essay. I have succeeded if this essay has formed a context of reflection for you.

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Klaus Schenck

“SF-Topology”: mapping manageable solution components & contexts…

Keywords: solution focus; topology; maps and territories; navigating model; linear, circular, interactive and systemic logic; internal vs. outside perspective; mapping bottlenecks / constraints

Summary:

Solution Focus (SF) involves a selection procedure: to “find what works” (and do more of it), navigating among the many other options that don’t work (and where you better “do something else”). This distinction is simple to understand, but may lead to many iterations before finally arriving at what works.

With only limited time for try-and-error iterations using a strictly “SIMPLE” (Jackson & McKergow 2002) map, it might help to increase the “requisite variety” (Ashby 1956), the capability to process complexity to reach a solution with less search-time.

To that end I describe here a map of a “solutions landscape”. Its “core fractal unit” (CORFU) may enrich our understanding of the landscape’s “topology” and our options to successfully navigate through it, towards good solutions: for ourselves, and our consulting clients. As usual in SF-work, the options of simplicity and variety are not mutually exclusive; a flexible balance may be tailored to the changing needs of developing situations.

Maps of maps and territories…

Solution Focus (SF), as the name implies, is one form of developmental consulting directly focusing on solutions, without lengthy investigations of the problems for which a solution is sought. It is said to follow a “theory of no theory”, to be simple, staying on the surface, respecting descriptions and phenomena for what they are - in some way just like Zen philosophy. But then again, SF consultants are real people of flesh and bone, with a history, with their own complications, with their own theories, following their own inner maps during their consulting process. And clients, too, have their own reasons, explanations, contradictions, secondary worldviews, and inner maps.

Of course we know since at least 1931 (Korzybski) that “a map is not the territory”, but as Bateson (1970) made clear, we never have direct access to any “territory” anyway.

All we have is “maps of maps, and maps of territories” (Heinz von Foerster). In some way the two should be related, should be just similar enough to be helpful for reaching goals in life’s territories. Imagine two persons meeting in New York, one asking the other for the way to the train station because he wants to catch a train to Paris, France, and the other person uses a roadmap of Shanghai, China, to explain the way: how, when and where will they arrive?
So to have an appropriate map of “solutions territory” and to make good use of it when trying to focus and reach a solution, may be crucial. The question then is: What’s “a solution” anyway, and how do we make a helpful, appropriate map of it?

What’s “a solution”? The linear parts …

The first two dimensions for our SF-topology come from the word itself. Looking for “a solution” implies, unavoidably, something that is a) better than what we currently have, and b) not yet reached, but hopefully accessible somewhere in the future.

If it weren’t better we would call it “(ex-) change” or “deterioration” rather than solution. If we weren’t hopeful to reach the desired state sometime in our life we’d call it “mere phantasy”, “wishful thinking” or “futile daydreaming” rather than solution. So one dimension already included in “solution” is time, usually thought of as some linear sequence of events reaching from the past through the presence towards the future. The other dimension included is the attribution of value: assessing some state, constellation of elements or process of events as something between good and bad, marvelous or awful. Notice that both of these dimensions may be described as a scaleable continuum or line between two ends of a polarity. They are *linear*, just like most of current management’s “input-output“, or “cause-and-effect”-models. Combining these two primary dimensions of time and value leads to figure 1.

The uppermost line in the right quadrant in SF-jargon is often called the “Future Perfect” (Jackson & McKergow: 19), and can be accessed by answering the wellknown “Miracle Question”. This could be further divided by some kind of reality check into two parts: illusions (or unrealistic dreams), and solutions.

Solutions are nothing to touch and take away, nothing “rock solid” and in one piece. Solutions usually consist of several elements in some specific arrangement or constellation, and require some series of steps to reach them. (Accordingly, the word “solution” in a slightly fuzzy way is used for both the desired outcome of a process, and for the process itself!)

Many ingredients may contribute to a solution: things, people, skills, past experience, money, energy, creativity…, collectively called resources. Resources and elements of the desired solution may be found in all times, all along the “time”-axis or “timeline”. Those from the past may be called “experiences”, those in the present “skills”, those from both the past and present “exceptions”, and those for the future “visions” or “goals”.

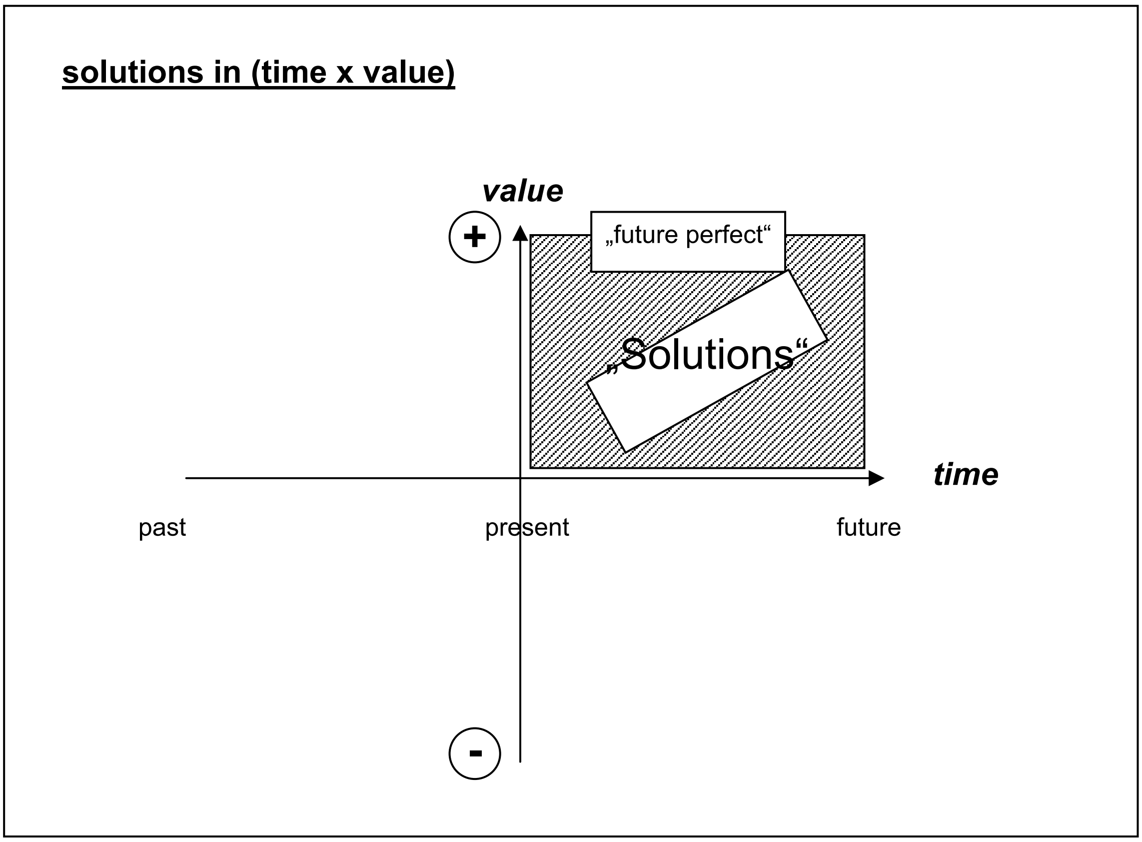

Figure 1: “solutions” = positive & in the future…

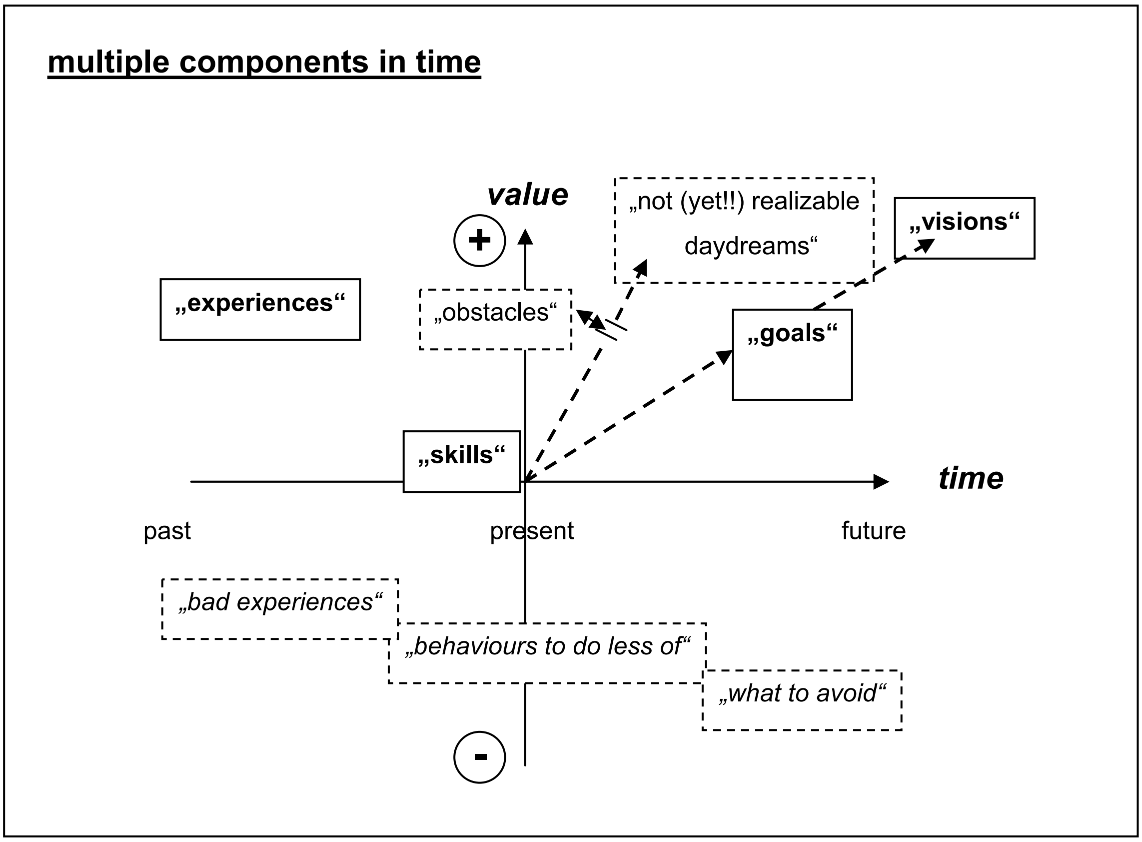

Figure 2: solutions’ components in time…

What we do is, trying to find out where we are ("A"), define what our goals ("G") will look like, and then initiating first steps - in consulting called: "interventions" -, using the resources we can access, to move from A to some B, hopefully bringing us closer to G. This has been nicely described in Jenny Clarke's "Albert Model" (Clarke 2005: 3). Topological "closer to" (my goal, or my solution) in SF usually is measured by scaling (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 95f.). On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the worst and 10 is the best case, the closer my assessment of the current situation gets to 10 the closer I get to my goal. So as time moves along the time-axis, our interventions try to steer the results further up the value-axis. If we don't violate any restrictions along the way, reaching our goal G will equal "the solution".

Model Questions (for the linear part)

How can that "2x2-matrix", that two-dimensional "map" be used in a practical way to support someone finding their goals and solutions? One way to use it is to translate all components of the map into solution oriented questions. The nice thing about that is: it doesn't really matter which quadrant of the map your client starts with - you can always find questions that point towards the upper right square, the solutions' quadrant! (Figure 2b)

If somebody is already talking about his vision or describing parts of his solution, the questions are about confirming, reinforcing, extending and moving towards action. *What else is helpful? Who will do what with whom until when? Who else will support this? What's the first practical step to start with? Can we start now?*

If someone is more happy about the past than about his ideas of the future (upper left quadrant) helpful questions will look for active and transferable parts of that past. *How did you do that? What helped? What else? How could you do it again? Which part of that could you do again? What else?*

If someone is afraid of, or complains about (his phantasies of) a "bad future" (lower right square) turning-around questions may be tried. *How could that be avoided or turned around? Who would have to do what to change that perspective? What would you like to see instead? What else?*

And if a client is focusing on, or feels trapped in a "bad past" (lower left square) coping questions apply. *How did you survive under these tough conditions? How come it wasn't even worse? What did you learn or gain from that terrible experience? What else? How could that be useful today (now that you've obviously survived, and made it until here and now ...)?*

Thus, the map can help to give orientation where the client stands, and what kind of question to select to support focusing positive possibilites and resources.

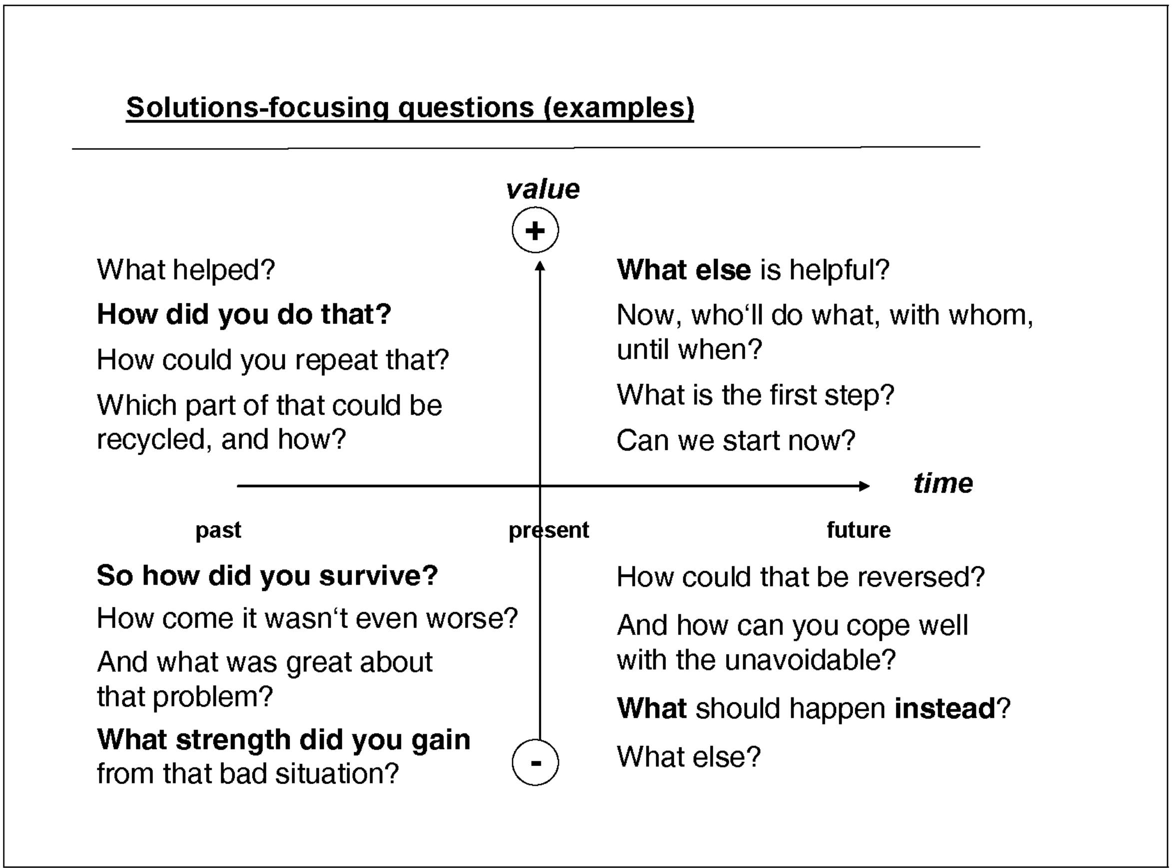

Figure 2B: solutions-oriented questions from all directions…

Multiple causes and effects

Now any intervention can produce more than one outcome. Some may bring us closer to G (higher on our value-axis), some may on the contrary be counterproductive and enlarge the distance to G (be lower on the value-axis), some may be neutral, producing neither harm nor benefit. So beyond the *desired* effect of our intervention or first step there may be ("emerge") expectable *side*-effects that we may or may not accept as being worth the effort, and there may be still further unforeseen, or even unnoticed effects. The same is true for the so called "causes": Of all possible events that contribute to the result only a fraction is noticed, and of these only a fraction has been taken into account during planning the intervention (figure 3). And even the current situation, the point in time between the causes in the past and the effects in the future, is "not what it used to be" if we change its description at any one of the possible "logical levels" (Dilts, 1990), or from any other "thinking colour" (De Bono, 1985)

Worse still, not all causes are locatable in the past (Aristotles' "causa finalis" lies in the future!), and some effects even link back to the causes. "Feedback" happens!

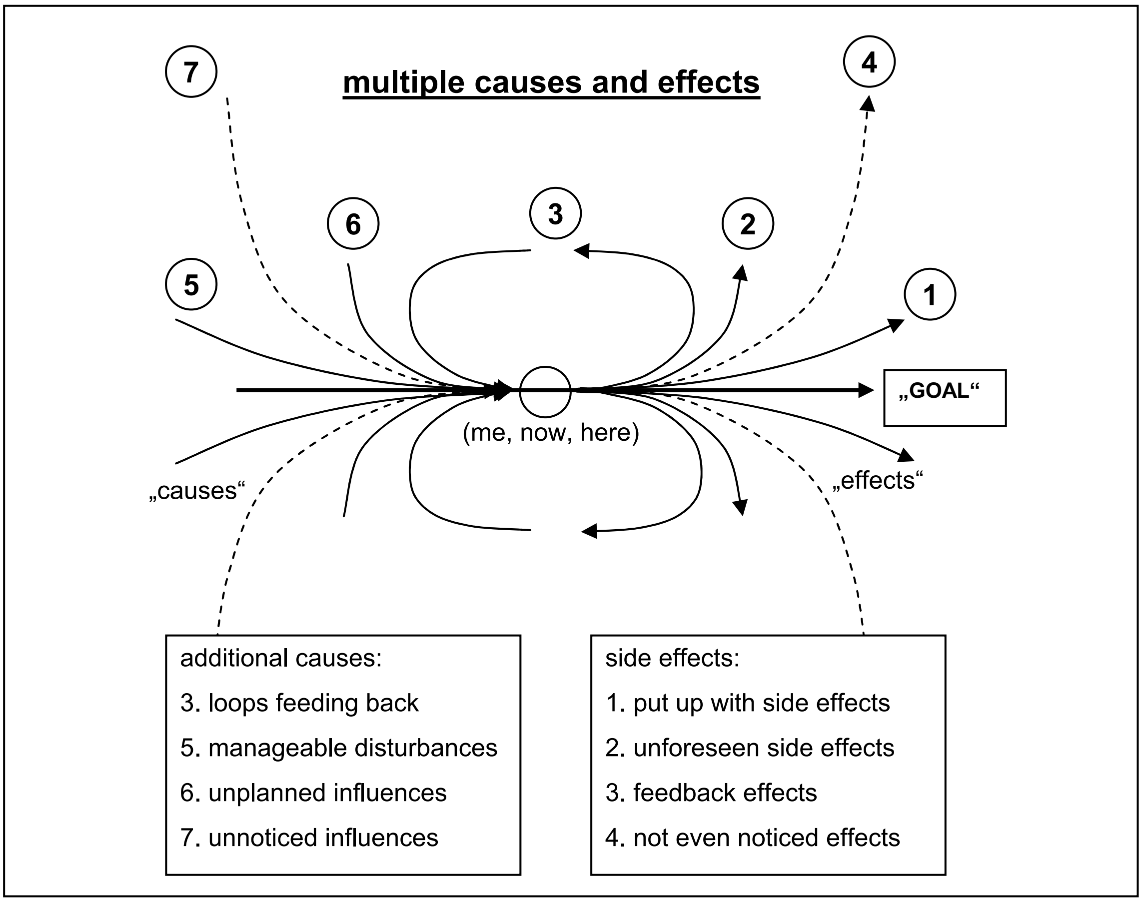

Figure 3: multiple causes & (side-) effects…

Some causes are home-made, effected by the effects they caused… Now how did they do that? This has to do with another unavoidable ingredient of solutions: people.

Solutions - the reciprocal part …

The first person a solution cannot avoid is the one for whom it is a solution. Without someone who defines something as a solution, it isn't any. (The same, by the way, is true for "explanations" - and for "problems"!) Now persons cannot exist alone for some fundamental reasons. People, as all living beings (and in fact most components of the universe) are "open systems", entities that can't avoid having some exchange with the world around them.

Each human being (or, in a more abstact way, each "viable system") vitally depends on exchange with others, on a variety of levels: contact, food, sex, products and services for money, ideas… If no part in the outside delivers what's needed, the person starves. If no part in the outside world takes away the output, the person suffocates in its own waste. So every person, in fact every open or viable system needs to have at least one partner, who can recycle the "waste" (the output / C_1's product P_1) and convert it into "food" (useful input / C_2's product P_2) again, and vice versa. Please notice that "food" and "waste" between humans is not restricted to material input and output. Many "currencies" apply: the exchange could just as well comprise services, informations, communication (talking, listening), attention (more and more the rarest good in the world!) appreciation (compliments, smiles) affection (fascination, love), and whatever else individual people cannot produce for themselves, but for other people. (Just like in: "Nobody is so poor that he can't give you a smile, nor so rich that he doesn't need one.")

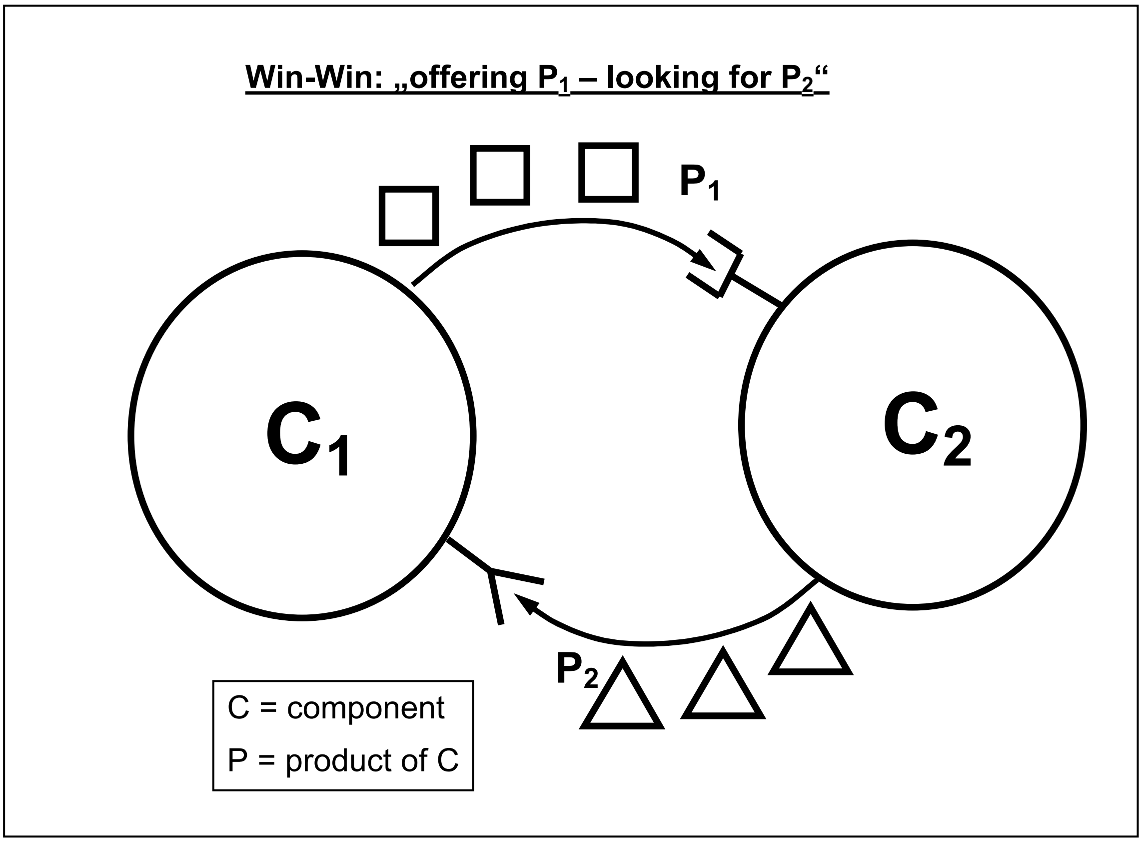

Figure 4: one partner's output is the other's input - and vice versa…

Only in interactive exchange both parties' needs can be satisfied – and a larger system will emerge.

Outside abstract models these systems usually comprise of many more than only two components. But the functioning principle remains the same: Totally different goals of each of the partners lead to a common solution! Which, the other way round means that what's a goal for one part of a larger system can and will be different from what's a goal for some other part of the same larger system - and again very different from what's a goal for the entity of "larger system"! So where do we focus in SF?

This description is "true" (in that it can be applied) across a range of systems of different magnitudes. Our bodies' cells prefer 37°C and 100% relative humidity as environmental conditions - our body as a whole would be rather stressed by the same as climate. A factory as a whole may need to run 24h a day and all week - none of the workers operating it would accept the same for themselves. Still both need each other, the body and its cells, the factory and its workers. And both need what's exchanged between them, the food and the metabolites, the work and the money. So both have to respect the larger or smaller system's needs while trying to optimize their own functioning. The viability needs of wholes and of their parts are different, but they mutually inform and restrict each other.

Towards the core topology: combining the parts …

So if persons can't be deleted from solutions, and they come in pairs or larger numbers, how do they fit with the preliminary time x value topology of solutions? Simply: by combining the two models "orthogonally" to each other, as sketched out in figure 5, and with more detail in figure 6. I like to call this full model "CORFU", for "core fractal unit" (with the mathematics-derived term "fractal" intentionally referring to the aspects of self-reference and scaleability across orders of magnitude).

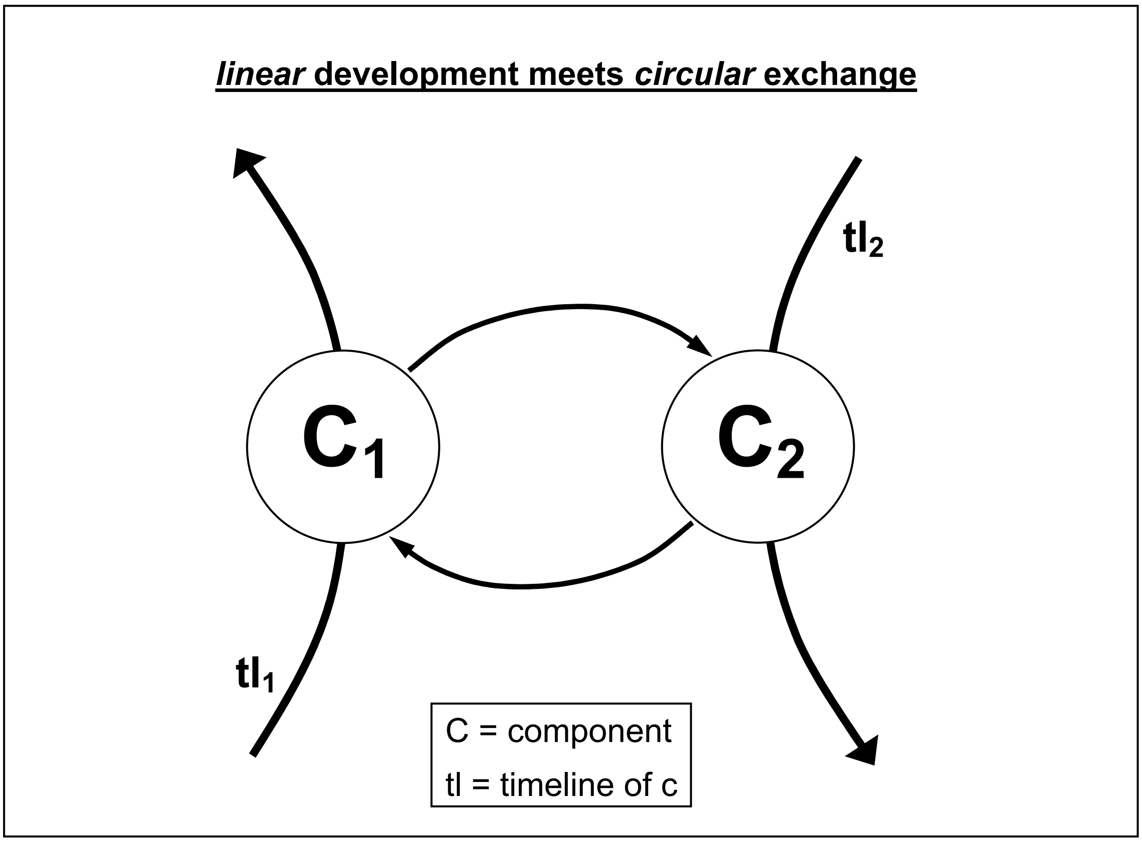

Figure 5: towards individual goals - thriving on exchange…

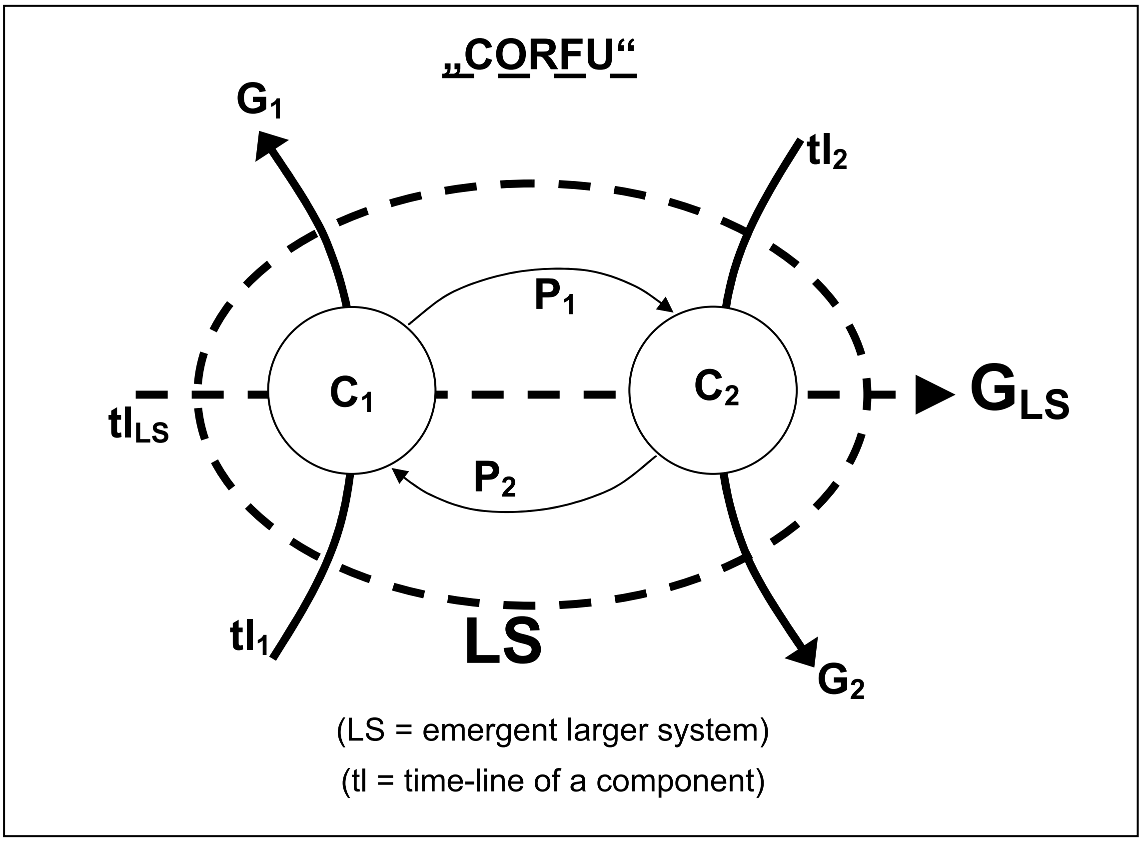

Figure 6: “CORFU”, the “core fractal unit” of systems - and of their solutions…

Here we have two components (C_1 and C_2), each with its own timeline (tl_1 and tl_2) and on its own way towards its own goal (G_1 and G_2). To be able to keep moving they have to exchange some products (P_1 and P_2). From all this together - the components with their goals and their exchange of products - emerges a larger system (LS) with its own goal (G_{LS}) approached via its own timeline (tl_{LS}). Any valid “solution” will have to take into account all involved parties’ goals (G_1 and G_2 and G_{LS}) and the balance of their exchanges. A “solution” is not just reaching my goal - but doing so while other parts of the interlocking system reach, or at least approach their goals, too.

If the goal can be clearly named but still no progress towards it observed, the obstacle might be in the interaction rather than on the individual’s timeline. Any goal neglected or jeopardized is a source of conflict and jeopardy for the solution. Similarily, when the values of the exchanged contributions P_1 and P_2 are too unequal: Then one of the components runs out of fuel or into the accumulating waste, goes out of business either way, and the whole system ceases to work.

Jackson & McKergow stated (2002: 37): “Systems have properties that are in between their component parts. It is the interactions between the parts that define the system.” This description now might be extended: It is the parts *and* the interactions between them, *and* the emergent larger system these create, *and* the interactions between the parts and the system (*and* between the system and the next larger environment etc.) which define the system. And it is the balance between the parties and contributions involved that keeps it running.

Now the picture is more complete - but at the same time on the edge of looking complicated… (I hardly dare to mention that the LS can itself be again understood as a component of the next even larger system! Just as each of the components C_1 and C_2 could - and usually will - be comprised of smaller components or sub-systems…) It might violate one major demand of SF: to “keep it simple!” The advantage of this model is its versatility: it can be applied to, and help navigating through, many different situations looking for solutions. And whenever we pick out some specific part for some specific application, this part should be sufficiently simple again even for us “solutionists”…

CORFU-questions

And again, for practical application of the model each component can be “translated” into useful, solution-oriented questions! What do *I* have to offer (P_1) that is attractive for someone else (C_2)? Who (C_2) could supply me with what I need (P_2) for my getting closer towards my goal (G_1)? If I know who (C_2) provides what I need (P_2): what do I know about *their* goals (G_2) so that I can offer something in exchange (P_1)? What do I know about the goals of the larger system (G_{LS}) to be able to take action that supports it, or at least doesn’t contradict it? If I don’t get what I need and know the other party could provide, what do *I* have to change? What do I have to do more of or less of? Do I have to decrease my price or increase my product information? Do I have to talk more or to listen more? Would some other “currency” of what I have to offer help (i.e. attention rather than money, compliments rather than critical comments?)? The list can be extended almost indefinitely …

How many more questions would be helpful for you, the reader? Who could provide them? What would you do differently if you had them? What would you have to offer in return? How could you communicate that? Who would notice your offer, and how?

If you changed your questions, how would that change your problems - and your solutions?

Some examples of applications:

Imagine a manager (C_1) in conflict with a co-worker (C_2), who doesn’t seem to actively support the goals of the team (G_{LS}). The miracle question only showed that none of them was a customer for change yet: both of them were convinced that mainly the other one would have to change. And while trying to make the other one change, their own initial goals got out of sight. The pseudo-goal “the other one has to change” had replaced their original goal. By gentle and stepwise interviewing C_1, eliciting what he knew about the goals G_2 of C_2 and about the contributions P_1 from his side which C_2 would perceive as helpful towards his G_2, and vice versa, both of them started to open up for change. They realized that intuitively they had confused the organization's and the involved persons' goals - and that they had to think counter-intuitively before finding a satisfying solution. They realized they had to support their "enemy" to have their goals met, because they couldn't meet them without the other person.

As Jackson & McKergow put it (2002: 44): "The main route to the world treating us differently is for us to initiate a different way of treating the world. […] The doing gets amplified and comes back to us from a different world." The "different world" that feeds back on any component is the other components involved, and the larger system they create together.

Imagine a company C_1 and their customer base C_2. Now both "components" consist of larger, multi-person systems. Again the model can be applied. The decision-makers in company C_1 have to find out what product range (P_1) they offer as to make their customers (C_2) pay enough money (P_2) to allow C_1 to reach their goal (G_1): survive and make a profit. The interest of the customer C_2 will vary with the degree to which P_1 (what he receives) is supporting him in reaching his own goal G_2. Vice versa C_2 may ponder the fair amount of money P_2 to deliver for the company's product P_1, and that will depend again on both parties current goals. Internal sub-components, the company's departments will focus on different aspects of the whole picture. Sales will be eager to increase P_2, income; engineering will be interested in adding features to $P_{1,}$ their "baby", the technical product; marketing will want to learn more about G_2, the customers' needs, to connect the former two. Each of these sub-perspectives can be addressed specifically by SF-questions.

A solution that helps both parties to survive is reached by balancing the needs involved. Neither the company nor the customers, nor any of the companys' internal functions can be taken out of the system or their goals ignored completely without the system falling apart completely. So solutions almost always are a question not of "either - or", but rather of balancing the "how much of which ingredient or what aspect, for today, in this specific set of context conditions?" "Terms of trade", assessed in "human currencies", if you'd use business jargon. Here, scaling comes in handy as a tool to check for relative amounts.

Possible extensions of the model:

1. The whole CORFU is, obviously, viewed from an outside, observer's, perspective. From an insider's perspective it looks different: all the other components, and $P_{2,}$ and the LS are "environment", into which own products, services, and waste (P_1) are released! Now this insider's perspective is equally valid to be taken from P_1 or P_2 - counter-intuitively in the beginning. P_1 could be a project, looking for what project team it would take to create benefit for whom. Both

the team and the project's customers might be exchangeable - from the project's perspective! P_1 could be money: from the perspective of international financial markets it is quite secondary where it comes from and what it is used for to produce with, as long as it enlarges its own volume profitably. Or when P_1 and P_2 are communications, the people uttering them may be viewed as environment for, rather than part of the communications. Strange at first, but offering perspectivic differences that may make a difference…

2. Of course there usually are more than two partners involved. This is where competition starts, markets emerge, components and products acquire life cycles. Only when the individual parts can be exchanged for others can the LS survive departure or death of any of its components.
3. Contrary to the basic model picture, the components may be of widely unequal size: one may represent the sub-, the other the supersystem or environment. As described above, when seen from one component's perspective all others together are perceived as - more or less differentiated, inner or outer - "environment". This links nicely to conventional managerial wisdom: Many of the well known portfolios or "two-by-twos" (SWOT, BCG-matrix, McKinsey-matrix,…) compare and combine features of one element (i.e. a company) and its relevant environment (i.e. the market) to identify opportunities (for solutions!).
4. All of these extensions, and more, may of course be combined…

And as above, all can be converted into solution oriented questions. Which we'll skip here for now, but invite the reader to eplore the options that may be opened up by inventing as many useful questions as you can, and asking them.

Conclusion

In searching for solutions, for ourselves or for clients, we sometimes may focus in directions that look promising, but don't work. The so called "theory of constraints" (Goldratt 1994, 1997) convincingly shows the need to especially focus on a system's "bottleneck", its limiting resource or process step. Putting effort into parts of a system outside its bottleneck resource doesn't help, doesn't improve the system's overall performance. The CORFU-model helps mapping the bottleneck of a system more easily when searching for a solution.

The main mode of applying CORFU in practical management and consulting is translating its components into all sorts of solution oriented questions. Depending on where you are focussing, you'd choose confirming, reversing, or coping questions, hypothetical, circular or scaling questions, precise, diffuse or "clean" language - whatever helps you and your client to focus on solutions. The model provides an orienting frame for selecting appropriate questions.

The model also helps to understand that “a solution” never is just one party getting closer to their goal at the expense of others involved. A sustainable solution always means gains for all parties involved: the interacting subjects, and the larger system they unavoidably create by interacting.

With its moderate complexity CORFU offers some “requisite variety” - while still respecting the human mind’s “9-components-maximum-at-a-time” proposed by Miller (1956).

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Matthias Varga von Kibéd

Solution-Focused Transverbality: How to keep the Essence of the Solution-Focused Approach by extending it

Keywords: SFBT approach, transverbal language, transverbality, structural constellations, SySt approach, solution geometric interview, miracle question, future perfect, arameic mode, semantic reaction, Solution-Focused group interview, algorithmic vs axiomatic didactics, basic attitudes in SFBT, tetralemma, tetralemma constellation

Summary:

As the Solution-Focused Approach of the BFTC Milwaukee School is expanding, spreading to ever new professional realms, certain essentials may be endangered in its transmission. The idea of Solution-Focused Transverbality is proposed as a concept that may be helpful both to keep the essentials in method and attitude for the Solution-Focused Approach and to expand it to, as well as transform it for, new fields of application. Tetralemma work, the Solution Geometric Interview and Systemic Structural Constellations are used to exemplify these ideas.

I]

Steve de Shazer was a man with a vision - although he never would have phrased it that way. His special gift to condense useful observations into clear patterns and to dedicate years of hard work after to make the Solution-Focused work even more simple and more easy to teach, lies at the very foundations of this approach.

'Everything I learned I stole from Insoo' was one of his ways to acknowledge the enormous influence that the ingenious practice of Solution-Focused interviewing in the work of his wife, Insoo Kim Berg, had on his way of thinking and acting. Still, sometimes the importance of Steve's ability to go to the methodological roots and essential principles of the approach that he and Insoo (in collaboration with their co-workers from the BFTC Milwaukee) formed over the years is not given its full credit.

Steve's contribution is in a certain sense at the same time theoretical and practical - in a way where he found his closest intellectual relative in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. 'All explanation has to go away and only description take its place' is one of Wittgensteins famous dicta in his 'Philosophical Investigations'. Steve lived and exemplified this teaching for the field of therapy and consultation.

II]

As the Solution-Focused approach was so successfull that it kept and keeps spreading to an enormous diversity of different fields (this congress bearing proof to some of these recent developments) new modifications and combinations, variations and implementations of this approach appear all the time. While this process is necessary and natural, it contains some danger of loss. Thus it seems appropriate to exchange ideas about which elements and aspects might be especially useful and suitable to not only keeping the spirit and the logical clarity of the SFBT approach alive but to allow it to develop in a natural way among all these useful new developments around it. (I'll use here the abbreviation 'SFBT approach' not only for the therapeutical applications but also for the use in consultation, social work, teaching etc.)

III]

In this brief paper I would like to make some remarks on aspects that seem useful to me in this respect. As I'm myself 'guilty' of one of these combinations of the Solution-Focused approach with other methods- developing in cooperation with my wife Insa Sparrer, (who introduced the idea of combining SFBT with constellations in the first place) the *Systemic Structural Constellations* (SySt)[1], I'll introduce the concept of *transverbal language* that has become a fundamental concept of our structural constellations approach. I then will extend this notion to the idea of *Solution-Focused transverbality*, hoping that this concept has something to offer for the question of keeping and developing the liveliness of the BFTC approach.

In a preliminary fashion the concepts of transverbality, transverbal language, Solution-Focused transverbality and their relation to the SFBT approach can be characterised as follows:

(A) Transverbality

…means going beyond the verbal and the nonverbal in a way that encompasses both and extends them by irreducible aspects of groups of persons in a specific way. This extension is connected with possibilities for forming models of systems behaviour by groups of persons. Scenic methods are primary fields of application for the concept of transverbality. We will briefly hint at in which way aspects of transverbality are implicitely contained in a good SFBT practice and in which way transverbality in a fuller version as appearing in scenic methods, especially in the SySt approach, may be helpful for developing the SFBT approach further and for transfering it to new

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[1] In this text the term "Systemic Structural Constellations" (SySt) stands for that as it was developed by the author and Insa Sparrer (Sparrer, 2004). SySt is a registered trade mark.

fields. *Tetralemma work* and the idea of the *tetralemma constellation* can be used to exemplify this.

(B) Transverbal language

…looks at scenic methods as a specific example, and at many everyday aspects of human behaviour in groups and communities as processes that can in a useful way be regarded as generalised linguistic processes, going *beyond verbal and nonverbal expression* by making use of certain perceptional abilities specific to human groups as *model systems* (cf *representative perception* later in this paper). Role playing, use of theatre principles, sociodrama, sculpture and constellation work can be seen as examples.

We will briefly consider in which way SFBT on the one hand already contains some aspects of the transverbal language and, on the other hand how certain formats of SySt work, especially Insa Sparrers *Solution Geometric Interview* as an expansion of Insoo Kim Berg's methodology for *Solution-Focused group interviews* expands the possibilities of the SFBT approach.

(C) We will use these ideas at the end of this paper to propose a concept of Solution-Focused transverbality

… as a possibility to protect and transmit essential aspects of the SFBT approach. We will by this make clear in which sense we consider any more or less purely linguistical analysis centered on verbal and nonverbal expression in the usual sense as insufficient for an explication of the core of SFBT.

Before looking at some details of these ideas I will touch certain in my view basic aspects of the SF approach.

Let's start with compliments and miracles.

IV]

Although the *miracle question* is seen by many as the center of the SFBT, Steve always stressed the indispensability of the *break* and the *compliments* according to his experience and to research results. At least in the German speaking regions the notion of compliment generated a lot of misunderstandings as it usually was translated as "Komplimente"- but 'Komplimente' in German have a clear touch of unsincerity and are much closer to 'flattery' than are 'compliments' in English and American usage. In Steve's practice, the ability to use compliments in a suitable way in the Solution-Focused interview required a high observational skill not only to discover admirable ressources the clients had already, but also to use a phrasing by mentioning them in a way the clients would be able to agree with.

Here lies one of many truly Ericksonian aspects of Steve's and Insoo's approach: compliments should be seen (and rather be translated) as *appreciative observations* and phrased in the client's language. This at the same time constitutes a possibility for connecting SFBT with ideas from Virginia Satir and Carl Robert Rogers.

The ability to give the right type of compliments in an acceptable language is only partially a technical element- it requires the experience and observational skill usually learned in many years of practical work as well as the attitude gained by that. But as Steve said 'without the right attitude it's not even a good technique', thus making attitude a part of a decent technique.

V]

This already constitutes a strong change of the notion of technique. Using the ordinary meaning of the word, the central role of the compliments already combines in a way technical and non-technical aspects, and thus requires at the same time a language centered approach and a going beyond it by developing observational abilities and a different attitude; and they are at the same time 'simple but not easy', as Steve liked to say.

The usual way of looking at the SFBT approach is often hindered by too narrow a restriction to the linguistic patterns in the sense of verbal language. For this I'd like to stress what seen from the structural constellations point of view are the *transverbal aspects of the famous miracle question.*

VI]

The miracle question doesn't exist' was one of the rather provocative remarks of Steve at the occasion of one of the conferences on constructivism in Heidelberg '-there is only the process of asking it!' Thus in order to understand the miracle question one has to look at the *process of its application in the language game of SFBT.* This process should be distinguished from the use of the *future perfect* as the analogy that was proposed by McKergow and Jackson in their book 'The Solution Focus'.

Their's is an exposition of the Solution-Focused view that gives a very useful didactic simplification of the SFBT approach that had many good effects for opening further up the field of management and consultation to it. The title already avoids the definition of the SFBT approach as either therapy or consultation - Steve de Shazer once said concerning this definitional question 'Let's just call it 'it'! '.

VII]

At the same time some of the didactic means used by McKergow and Jackson contain the danger of losing certain essential aspects for the sake of easier teaching. The future perfect analogy doesn't contain the subtle and at the same time powerful modal aspects of the miracle question. Let's make the difference clear:

Considering a client who wants to successfully complete a business project, the change from 'I want to have success with this project' as a expression of his aims to the future sentence 'I will be successful with this project' would only constitute some sort of positive thinking- something Steve abhorred and saw as totally unrelated to the SFBT approach.

The future perfect sentence here would be 'I will have had successfully completed the project.' While this maybe a useful framing of an autohypnotic trance state for exploring future possibilities, it still is of course far from the process of interviewing in the Solution-Focused style.

We come closer by using (like McKergow and Jackson do) questions of the 'How will you notice/find out that"-type to a conditional version of the future perfect. Thus 'If you will have had success with the project, what will you notice that is different? What will you do that is different? What will others notice that is different?' would constitute such *conditional future perfect questions*.

But still we have lost a lot of the in our view essential subtleties of the miracle question as a process:

(1)

The effectivity of the miracle question as a modified version of Erickson's crystal ball technique is closely connected with the expertise in carefully *pacing the client's access* to her ressources. In order to do this you need the modal versions like irrealis and optativus changing into the indicativus at a suitable point of time closely mirroring the client's verbal and nonverbal expression in the interview.

Thus when a client still seems to have a rather loose connection with her ressources you might not only start the central part of asking the miracle question by the usual 'just suppose ... a miracle' but continue with 'had happened and ...' instead of '...happens', but even go on to 'how would you find out' while with clearer signs of having gone to the experience of the 'miracle state' on the side of the client you would change in a not altogether grammatical fashion to factual statements 'happens' and 'how do you find out'.

This possibility alone makes already rendering of the grammatical status of the miracle question as *future perfect* already *inadequate as a full analysis*.

(2)

Asking the miracle questions is connected with the process of interrupting causal connections by the miracle's happening 'in the middle of the night' underlined by the aspect of surprise and unpredictability entailed by the notion of 'miracle'. None of these *modal aspects of imagination beyond causal connections* is describable by a future perfect alone.

(3)

The use of interruptions and pauses while asking the miracle question was often hinted at by Steve as an important part of the effectivity of asking it. Together with a strong emphasis on the hypothetical character given initially in this question by the intonation of the 'suppose....'-part of the question, the miracle question contains a *hypnotic frame for inner search processes* with a higher degree of creative freedom than the former everyday experiences of the client.

(4)

The miracle question is embedded in questions about exceptions in the past. This generates a grammatical mode that in Structural Constellations Work is called the *arameic mode* because there is, according to Pinkas Lapide's comments to the jewish exegesis of the gospels, a grammatical mode in the arameic language that exactly suites this purpose. This mode expresses the partial manifestation of a future event in the present as indication that a certain possibility really exists. The typical SFBT questions about parts of the miracle that have happened already before serve exactly this aim. This seems to be much more exact as a version of the structure of asking the miracle question than a future perfect.

Therefore, we would call the grammatical form analoguous to the miracle question 'the arameic mode'.

(5)

Future and future perfect alike can relate to a point in time like a goal or an aim and its attainment- but, as Insa Sparrer has pointed out in much detail, in her book 'Wunder, Lösung und System' *miracles are states* (and one, not many).

VIII]

Thus, to reduce the process of asking the miracle question (for which much more essential differences could be pointed out and were so by Steve) to a mere future perfect, while being a smart didactics for beginners, at the same time would constitute a relevant loss in the SFBT approach. (Still, careful exposition of the use of SFBT language like in Yvonne Dolan´s "One small step" is of high value to everybody trying to find her way into the field- and likewise for the transfer of the approach to the language of management the work of McKergow and Jackson opened the door to many.)

It should be mentioned however, that the frequent *confusion of goal and miracle* - eg. in some parts of NLP-literature - is effectively avoided by the future perfect analogy.

On the other hand, the future perfect seems to me to be closer to the *algorithmic didactics* used in teaching the basics of NLP where the degree of choice and freedom of the methods is highly restricted- "algorithmic" meaning here close to a flow diagram as a sort of recepy . SySt on the other hand uses an *axiomatic didactics* where there is a choice of possible basic forms and interventions built on them without any general rule in which order to apply them. (Axiomatic systems of sufficient complexity surpass in a certain sense the realm of the algorithmic decidable.) Louis Cauffman has proposed to describe the pattern of the SF interview in a new way that differs from the usual exactly in the way axiomatic calculi differ from algorithms -and tool boxes from recepies.

IX]

What seems especially precious in Steve's usage and way of asking the miracle question is something that easily gets lost when we try to transmit and codify the process by purely verbal, especially by written means. Naturally it will for the same reason be difficult to touch this aspect in written form here. However, as there is this track on Solution Focus and Scenic Methods at this conference, there is a chance that the idea will be understood.

X]

We see the Structural Constellations Approach (SySt, developed by Insa Sparrer and the author) as one form of scenic methods, building on what was developed in psychodrama, sociodrama and sociometry (Jacob Levy Moreno), sculpture work, family reconstruction, organisational reconstruction work (Virginia Satir), family constellations (Ruth McClendon, Les Kadis, Thea Schönfelder, Bert Hellinger), organisational constellations (Gunthard Weber), forum theatre work (Augusto Boal) and others. The SySt approach is characterised by combining the scenic methods especially in the style of Virginia Satir with an Ericksonian use of language and trance, systemic methods from the Milano and Heidelberg school and the Solution-Focused approach. The main emphasis in SySt lies on a constructivist methodology and the possibility of *hidden work* (where only the client has to be informed about the contents of the work).

XI]

All these different scenic methods can in a fruitful form be considered as *generalised linguistic frames* where the verbal is expanded beyond the nonverbal language of gestures and facial expression, beyond the prosodic qualities of verbal language like pitch and intonation, to a realm that in the SySt approach we have defined as *trans-verbal language*.

Transverbal language is defined by us as a language in the sense of regular behaviour (a) *encompassing verbal and nonverbal language*, (b) having certain types of *groups of persons*- not the single person- *as primary speaker* and (c) which is founded on *representative perception*.

As to (b), it is important that the groups in question form in a sense a sort of *model system*. Whatever is modelled than becomes a possible space of interpretation. All scenic methods form such model systems but there can be also such a forming of a model system as a spontaneous phenomenon in everyday life.

As to (c), *representative perception* in the SySt approach is defined as the *spontaneous appearance of differences in proprioception and perception in members of a group forming a model system* in reasonably good correspondence to structure and to tendencies for change in the modelled system.

Systemic Structural constellations (SySt) systematically use representative perception in the groups of people that by choice of representatives (possibly without any information about role contents) and *spatial arrangements are intended to give a picture of the system* for which the model was formed.

Therefore we consider the pictures of a constellation (and likewise for other scenic methods but with less emphasis on representative perception and stronger emphasis on other aspects) to be *sentences of the transverbal language* of structural constellations.

XII]

In what sense can now the SFBT approach and especially the miracle question be seen as part of such a transverbal approach? In what sense is this potentially essential for the application, teaching and transmission of SFBT? What could be considered as a consequence of this as the *transverbal solution focus*?

I propose to look at the SFBT approach at the same time as a linguistic approach in the sense of verbal language, as a form of *semantic reactions training* in the sense of *Korzybski´s General Semantics*, as a special form of inductions from *Ericksonian hypnotherapy* and as a *general attitude* to the world.

There was a lot of useful analysis of the linguistic forms of SFBT language that enormously enhanced understanding and teachability of the approach.

Therefore it is justified to look at SFBT as a linguistic approach in the sense of patterns of verbal language.

Semantic reactions in the sense of *Korzybski*´s general semantics are the totality of cognitive, emotional and physiological changes brought about by linguistic behaviour. Therefore semantic reactions are much better suited to understand the effects of hypnotherapeutic use of language in the Ericksonian sense of modifying the focus of attention and utilising natural states of trance than the usual Carnapian style semantics.

Taking Steve´s famous *comparative concept of understanding* - " we can understand what `better` means without knowing what `good` means " - in the SySt approach we train the use of language in structural constellations work by developing daily habits to make small *semantic reaction differentiation exercises* (SRDE), because the differences in semantic reactions matter according to this very basic idea of Steve´s.

This idea of Steve de Shazer would in my opinion make a good *corner stone for the whole of systemic thinking*.

To train people working with SFBT by e.g. asking them to develop compliments and tasks for a client during the SFBT interview´s break and then discussing the merits of the proposed compliments not by criticising them but by asking which intervention might seem less risky (i.e. in less danger to be refuted by the client) and by clarifying what is hoped for by the intervention ("Intending what?") is a beautiful tradition for semantic reaction differences. In the SySt approach we have used and expanded these types of SRDEs, giving more attention to various forms of systematic variation for forming the differences.

Thus the SFBT approach can also be seen as part of the program of General Semantics.

Steve told about the origin of many SFBT ideas coming from analysis of videotapes from Erickson sessions. After it had arisen, the miracle question was seen as closely related to Erickson´s *crystal ball technique*.

These and many other aspects justify looking at SFBT as a special version of Ericksonian work.

The Solution Focus is not a method or specific technique but rather a general attitude or basic point of view. It also could be seen as a language -a language never being just a method or technique but rather a net *of language games* belonging to different *forms of life* in the sense of the late Wittgenstein´s "Sprachspiele" and "Lebensformen" in his "Philosophical Investigations". Therefore the SFBT approach might deepen its understanding about what constitutes a Solution-Focused way of living. In the sense of the comparative methodology hinted at in (b), this will be possible by progress in applying the SFBT approach to new fields as every successful new application will require that something is better and that we have better possibilities to deal with certain problems and pains, wishes and hopes.

Gale Miller who gave the practice of SFBT an *ethnomethodological description* (in the sense of Garfinkel) in his "Becoming Miracle Workers" has developed astute observational experiments which demonstrate convincingly the huge influence of attitudes on reactions and observations in groups. Nobody who had any experience with experiments of this sort could reasonably doubt the *importance of noticing* and taking into regard the importance of *attitudes in SFBT* practice. Thus according to Steve´s dictum on attitude and technique mentioned in the beginning such aspects of teaching must be regarded as part of teaching a decent technique.

Therefore the SFBT approach is always beyond full verbal expression as no verbal expression ever covers the totality of language, life form and attitudes towards the world and as teaching about the influence of attitudes goes beyond a mere teaching of linguistic or paratactic patterns.

I´d like to add here a remark on *transcontinuity* as part of the SFBT approach. This notion was introduced for the SFBT world as a practical possibility to apply ideas of Gregory Bateson and of Bradford Keeney by Luc Isebaert and Marie-Christine Cabié in their book "Pour une thérapie brève" and described by showing how to balance the need for homeostasis (as a principle of continuity) with making a difference (as a principle of discontinuity). (The recursive interaction/entanglement of continuity and and discontinuity was given as description of the idea of transcontinuity on an EBTA conference in Bruges by Louis Cauffman.) To find out the way in which other approaches can be seen as transcontinuous often helps to bring about useful comparisons and even combinations of different forms of working with clients. In the SFBT approach the continuity is to be seen e.g. in the scaling questions, the good-enough-numbers on the scale and the standard first session formula task, while the miracle question exemplifies the importance of the sudden (and not causally explained) change in SFBT. Thus SFBT (and every stronger form of systemic work) is a *transcontinuous way of proceding*.

Being justified in different ways none of these four aspects captures the whole of SFBT. I take therefore the idea of *transverbal solution focus* as program to discover and train aspects of the solution focus not covered by these aspects. The astonishing ability of human beings to form model systems is at the very heart of scenic methods at least since Moreno´s foundational work. It is compatible with the SFBT approach and partially present in it´s practice. To understand this seems to me not only very helpful for training people to understand and apply the SFBT approach in it´s original form but also to take brave new steps in the spirit of the original approach to new realms. This section of the SOL conference should be seen as a modest expression of that vision.

Transverbal solution focus thus should mean the *concious extension of the SFBT approach to the human ability of simulating a system´s behaviour by forming model systems* with groups of persons (and the spontaneous perceptional differences arising that way, i.e. *representative perception*).

This will expand the possibilities for application and has already done so as Insa Sparrer´s use of the *solution geometric interview* has demonstrated. A solution geometric interview in Sparrer`s sense means a Solution-Focused group interview in the style of Insoo Kim Berg´s work but with constellated (i.e. *in ressourceful patterns spatially arranged*) groups of representatives (possibly mixed with original members of the system in question). Thus Solution-Focused work with an even higher degree of discretion and the possibility to simulate the presence of the full team in absence of some of the members not by role playing but by spontaneous perceptional changes became possible which alone already opens up many new applications. (Details and case examples can be found in Insa Sparrer´s "Miracle, Solution and System".)

But the transverbal solution focus also will draw attention and help teaching certain qualities (already inherent in Steve´s and Insoo´s work but easily overlooked as long as the analysis of verbal (and nonverbal) expression alone is seen as relevant for understanding the essence of SFBT). And we also see the beautiful possibility of scenic methods proponents becoming more interested in creative use of the SFBT approach within their own methods like Elisabeth Pfaefflin, Matthias Lauterbach and Hans-Peter Korn e.g. have begun to do for thework of Moreno. And by this, a Solution-Focused creative dialogue has started already and is developing further.

XIII]

Let´s end with some remarks on tetralemma work and SFBT. *Tetralemma work* is the basis for the *tetralemma constellations*, one of the main formats in structural constellations work, but it is really independent from any explicite usage of constellation work. Being founded in patterns from early Indian and buddhist logic (the socalled negation of the tetralemma coming from Madhyamika buddhism) it is in SySt tetralemma work characterised by looking at dilemmas and conflicts with five different perspectives:

- One side of the dilemma
- The other side(s) of the dilemma (where a bipolarity instead of a full dilemma would suffice for a tetralemma process to arise)
- Both (as the principle of *hidden or unnoticed connections* between the sides of the dilemma)
- Neither (as principle of *hidden or forgotten contextual aspects of the dilemma*)
- None of these ------- and not even that! (as the principle of *reflexive interruption of patterns*)

where the only from a purely theoretical perspective at first sight mysterious fifth aspect (a non-position as the buddhists would have it) encompasses all *attitudes that allow us to transcend any context*, e.g. compassion, reflection and humour.

In "Miracle, Solution and System", Insa Sparrer explains in detail how the Solution-Focused dialogue has the problem as first and the goal and/or the exceptions in the past as second position in the SFBT interview while the process of asking the miracle question contains access to the third, fourth and fifth position. If one or more of these positions are left out in the interviewing following the introduction of the miracle, usually the effectivity of the question is diminished. Therefore this analogy of tetralemma work and asking the miracle question is another practical example on how transverbal methods (like tetralemma work) may be useful to get a deeper under1standing and expertise in the application of the Solution-Focused approach.

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Wolfgang Eberling

Creating Attraction – Is there a hidden secret in the miracle question?

Why the miracle question works and how we can help to make it work

Keywords: Solution-Focused technique, miracle question, SF-principles, salutogenesis, attraction, Gestaltpsychology

Summary

The miracle questions seem to be the central piece of Solution-Focused work in any area of application. While it looks so simple, its usage in various contexts of work does not seem to be as easy. The miracle question does not work with my clients! Business people don´t believe in miracles! These are often heard comments we hear from colleagues who start to work in a Solution-Focused manner in their fields. Steve often seemed to emphasize the pragmatics of the miracle question e.g. by recently teaching us how to put it "the complete way". In his book he quotes Freud`s "Words were originally magic..." (De Shazer 1998) and suggests philosophical and other explanations for the kind of impact the miracle question can have. In this session we want to focus on the psychological explanations for the power of the miracle questions. How can we explain the fascination it holds for people and that it creates a motivation to work (and keep on working) towards their goals? Creating attraction seems to be one important answer, and some psychological concepts seem to help us to explain why and how it works.

1. Establishing attraction: Creating a preferred future by distinguishing outcome, effects and benefits.

One of the main concerns of the solution focus is to help our clients to create the kind of future which takes the place of "the problem", "the symptom" or just "the present state".

So one thing we learn right from the beginning of Solution-Focused work is to ask the question: "What would you like instead of ...?"

Our efforts are very much geared towards getting concrete and positive descriptions of the desired state that will substitute the present one. "Help the client to make a video description", Steve always claimed. "If we had a movie of you, what would we see? How would you behave differently?" I would name this very common focus as the result we are aiming for. We all know how to do this by using the well-formed goal criteria. Defining goals should be as concrete as possible so that you (the client) could take steps towards its realization.

Realization is also supported by going into details. “What else is different? What difference does this make? How is your day different?” all these questions focus on details:

- details about actions
- details about influences
- details about effects
- details about resources

Imagine yourself going to a travel agency to plan and book your next holiday trip: brochures and catalogues with pictures of the location, the country and the people help you to make your decision very much. And how much more could a video add to this?

The Gestaltpsychologist (Metzger 1999) always emphasized the importance details have in order to build the “Gestalt” and to differentiate it from others and of course to create attraction which means make it attractive to the client. We need to keep this in mind when dealing with the outcome and goal that emphasize the short term consequences of the miracle.

Attractive effects and benefits – important steps towards meaning and sense

Dilts and Epstein (Dilts et al. 1991, Dilts 1998) introduced the distinction of “outcome” and “effect” in their SCORE-model.

“Effect” for them is something that results from achieving a certain outcome. Asking the general question: “What effects does this have? Who will be positively affected by the miracle?” creates a focus on the consequences of the miracle within the environment and network or “system” of our clients. It focuses also on the long term effects in the terms of opportunities which are made possible by achieving the outcome. They result from it.

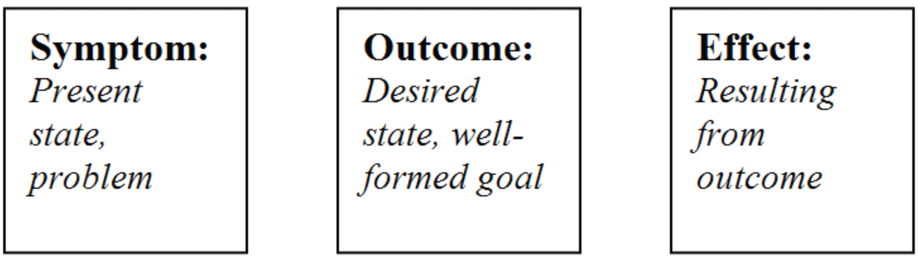

Figure 1: SCORE-model (Dilts and Epstein 1991)

In my experience “Effects” are one of the “hidden drivers” of the miracle question. Therefore, only listing all the actions resulting from the miracle without looking at the effects and hopefully the *meaning* this has for the client’s world is only a small part of the harvest the miracle question allows us to have. “Effects” should be linked to *values* and *beliefs*, something that is important to the client. Being meaningful to the client guarantees motivation to work for it. Adding *benefit* to this guarantees that you attach something the client will get for him- or herself. Questions like:

> “What will you benefit from it?
>
> Who else will benefit from this development?
>
> Which new opportunities will show up from this?
>
> What would be the best benefit for you and your company?”

help to establish a focus on that clearly.

Motivation is always linked to the level of beliefs and values, not just action.

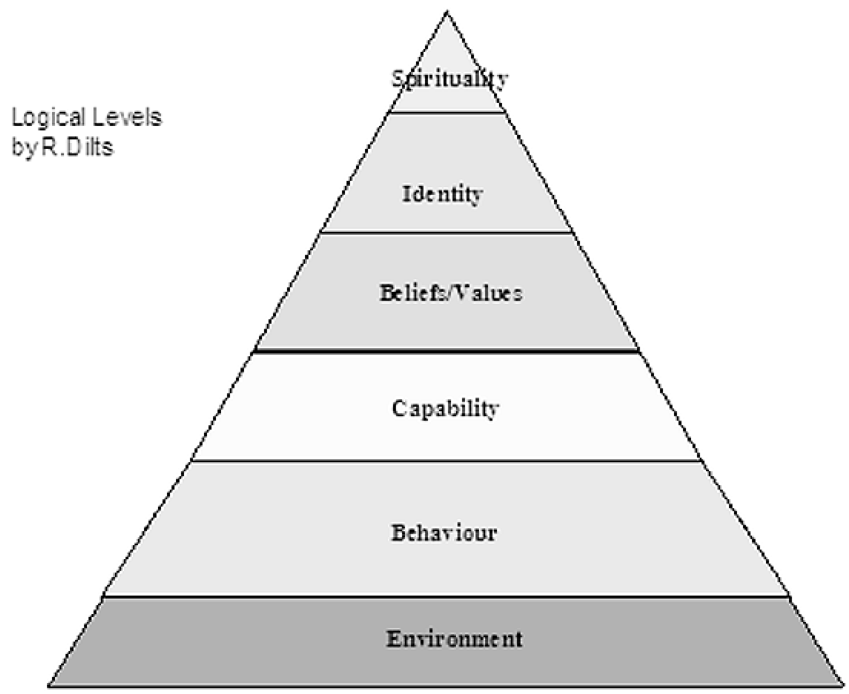

Figure 2: Logical Levels (Dilts 2004)

If the benefit is not clear, you can assist in finding it by asking:

“It somehow seems to be very important to you. What´s so important about it that you are willing to make all this effort?”

2. Experiencing attraction: discovering our own influence and impact

The miracle question in the first phase does not ask our clients: “And how will you do all this?” The first step mainly aims to identify all the parts which make up the puzzle, so we are interested in getting all the pieces of the miracle picture together. Later on we care about putting order and linking to resources. By asking for the “small miracle” or the” part of the miracle” that has already happened or even by asking about ”exceptions” we focus on client´s means and resources to make the desired state happen.

If we and clients discover means and resources we experience what Bandura called “self-efficacy”: the expectation in our own capability to achieve goals and plans. By referring to a “reference experience” of success, of a small miracle that has already happened we “pump up” our confidence in our capability to be effective, to influence and have impact on actions, results, goals and plans etc. If we have once been successful with something why should we not be so again? This directly nurtures and empowers our beliefs in ourselves and therefore reinforces and strengthens all our behaviours towards the desired outcome.

Experiencing “self-efficacy” is learning on our own model. It is attractive as it enables us to give the credit of successes to ourselves. It helps us to contribute to our own self esteem, store it on our mental and emotional “heart disc” and helps us to keep it there on a higher level (generalization of learning).

As the reference experience is only one starting point of experiencing “self-efficacy” we have more means to continue this. Our next solution-focused tool is the scale. Scaling provides us with some ways to experience attraction:

> “You are at 3 already. How did you do this? *(ask for persons contribution and resources=self efficacy again)*
>
> What´s the difference between 3 and 1? *(build up differences, help to experience desired progress already)*
>
> What did you contribute to this? *(make sure that it is achieved by the client= credit to the client=self efficacy)*
>
> What does 4 look like? *(outline the next details of the desired steps and state, focus on the “ingredients” of this picture)*
>
> What resources do you have to make this happen?” (*assess available resources and needed resources)*

The scale not only helps us to focus on our next steps and the resources we need to take those, it also continuously re-creates attraction by describing the next states on the way to the goal and links it to our resources which contribute to it (effected by us).The scale – so to speak – is a “miniature version” of the miracle on each number we talk about with our clients.

3. The fuel of attraction: creating and maintaining positive" states of minds"

Experiencing more or less continuous progress also contributes to our belief and confidence that we can really achieve our goals. During a therapy or coaching session we often experience big changes in clients' moods and emotional states. Solution-Focused interviewing not only seems to cheer our clients up from the very beginning (f.i. they smile and laugh more often), but also keeps them in this state for a longer period throughout the session and also during the whole coaching or therapy process. A good state of mind works as an order parameter for other events and thoughts, it creates a kind of wake for bringing in more good events, thoughts and feelings. This "state of mind" (Horowitz 1987, Schiepek 1999) attracts a certain quality of cognitive-emotional patterns of behaviour and leads to a more general shift in clients' attitudes towards difficulties and even their whole lives. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, perceiving and feeling more positively establishes the focus more on other positive things and feelings, a positive and self-reinforcing loop of desired things in clients lives. Therefore it is important to keep Steve´s and Insoo´s reminder in mind to start every following session by asking:"So what´s better?" It´s clearly the trigger to start and continue the same positive perceiving-feeling-pattern as before.

4. Creating and maintaining a big attractive picture: bringing(a new) "sense" into our lives

By making systematic use of the above described procedures, the Solution-Focused approach often leads to a longer lasting change in our attitudes towards life. Life seems to make "sense" and therefore we can look at the top of the logical level pyramid: the "spiritual" level (Dilts 1996, 2003). I know that's not the appropriate word for all of us coaches and clients. But the effect seems well recognized by all of us. Antonovsky (1987 a,b) calls this *"sense of coherence"*, the ultimate puzzle part in our concept of attraction. What does this include?

Basically it means that we are experiencing a kind of "red thread" in our life, which makes it appear "meaningful". Our personal world seems

- understandable, ordered and congruent
- even difficulties can be framed within a bigger picture (*sense of comprehensibility*) and have meaning (*meaningfulness*)
- life brings up challenges and tasks which have to be solved. And there are resources available by which this can be done (*sense of manageability*)
- even these efforts become meaningful as "normal parts of our lives", they make sense, it´s worth putting them on. Life has a direction, it has goals and projects and we are willing to work for them (*effort justification*) (Schiepek 1998, Haken et al 2006)

In Antonovsky´s (1993, 1997) concept of "salutogenesis" it is also obvious that this healthy life has to be permanently re-created, by acting in a resourceful way or by coping with difficulties successfully. It is attained by pro-active activities of a person and not a given capital we can live on. And finally Antonovsky emphasizes the meaning of resources: physical and psychological resources, supportive social networks, etc., which are continuously addressed, focused and encouraged throughout Solution-Focused work.

I hope this all could explain why it can be so attractive to work in a Solution-Focused way and why it also feels attractive, for both the professional and the client and customer.

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Solution-Focused Situation Management: Finding Cooperation Quickly

Keywords: solution-focused, cooperation, crisis management

Summary

A team will not be visibly ineffective until its function has deteriorated significantly. Good management consists in preventing matters reaching such a point. This implies that it is necessary to resolve small problems before they become significant.

Many managers will find that a wide variety of staff will come to their office without appointments to share various problems and anxieties. It is necessary to respond to these appropriately, respectfully and above all, promptly.

My original training in crisis management came from psychodynamic group work and simple mediation. Once I became familiar with solution-focused ideas and saw Steve and Insoo demonstrating them, then I became able to address situations in a different way and to organise my knowledge of how to do this.

The text describes these changes and the script which I now use. It includes the discussion of the microskills of interviewing which are a significant part of the solution-focused toolkit. Business and management trainings traditionally focus more on what is to be done than on how to deliver the message effectively. Introducing solution-based approaches can be done as didactic teaching or by the use of exercises which highlight different conversational styles and ways of delivering messages.

Introduction

Eighty per cent of our effective work comes from 20% of what we do. This means that being over-conscientious is not likely to be effective. An organisation will achieve its assigned task until it falls below 20% efficiency. This is based on the performance of military units in defensive combat, quoted by Luttwak (1969). These percentages are supported by anecdotal accounts from many enquiries into failing hospitals and businesses. Thus a team or organisation will not be recognised as ineffective until its function has deteriorated severely. By that time poor performance will be occurring often within the system. This accounts for the common experience among managers that once you begin to investigate an issue you will find that there are many more problems and errors in existence than you had been aware of. A great deal of work will then be needed to restore effective functioning and to re-establish good practice.

Good management consists in preventing matters reaching this stage. This means dealing with a lot of small problems before they become significant. Such good management is largely invisible, because problems are averted or managed early (Parkinson 1965). Parkinson also suggested that good managers do not ask 'why' questions or look at the history of the problem; they focus on what to do now.

Many managers will find that a wide variety of staff will come to their office without appointments to share various problems and anxieties. It is necessary to respond to these appropriately and respectfully. At the same time you wish to encourage self-reliance rather than dependence on you as the manager. You wish your staff to address issues themselves as far as possible. This is in the interests of the organisation and of the staff themselves, who will become more confident and experienced. At the same time, if an immediate response is forthcoming then the issue is much less likely to enlarge itself or to draw in other participants.

Method

My original training in crisis management came from psychodynamic group work and simple mediation. This was a demanding approach for me. The manager can become cast in the role of peacemaker, carrying messages from one stakeholder to another. This is frustrating for the manager. It is often ineffective, since the greatest responsibility then falls on the manager instead of on the parties to the dispute. Once I became familiar with solution-focused ideas and saw Steve and Insoo demonstrating them then I became able to address situations in a different way. Over repeated trials I was able to organise my understanding of how to do this.

It became apparent that the same question set could be used to manage any situation, without the need for advance knowledge of the situation or the participants. The principles of the approach are summarised below.

When someone comes through the door, often in a state of concern or anger, immediately set aside your current task and give them your full attention. Find out who they are, if you do not already know. It is best not to invite them to sit down, unless they are significantly distressed. They will be more inclined to action if they are standing (see below). In the same way, it is best that you remain seated, as it will increase their anxiety if you rise quickly in response to their appearance. Then they will be inclined to dramatise their story in order to justify their visit. If you remain seated while they are standing it also conveys that you do not expect to interrupt your previous task for long.

Use some of the colleague's words and language whenever possible. The Mental Research Institute workers who constructed strategic therapy noticed that using the name given by the client to their problem was much more powerful than applying a professional title to it. Applying a new title usually gives the person the impression that they are being contradicted. It devalues their knowledge of the situation.

Steve de Shazer carried this idea further to look at the effect of literally using some of the client's words or turns of phrase in every response that is made. This is an effective technique for building relationships with anyone quickly. This skill is conveniently referred to as 'language matching' and represents a way of staying connected to the client and their experience of their situation. Language matching ensures that you are paying attention to every word and that this is clearly recognised by the client. It is part of the manager's skill to be able to ask the necessary questions while using something from their response to do this.

Begin with asking the questions given below.

What is the problem?

Ask for a behavioural description:

What happens?

Who does what?

When does / did it happen?

Are we certain that this is happening?

How do we know?

Taking brief notes at this stage helps you to detect repetition and demonstrates that you are giving your full attention to the issues. It is important to discover the quality of their information about the alleged events (Crosby 1981). Usually by the time you have obtained the answers to these questions your colleague has become calm enough to think about the situation as well as reacting to it. Now you can move on to the next set of questions.

What small / first step will show us that the situation is moving in the right direction?

What can be done?

Who can do it?

What is the next step in this solution?

It is best that you only offer ideas yourself if it is essential, and only after asking for their suggestions. You want them to learn to solve problems confidently and without reliance on you. This is good for their development. It is more efficient for the business. It will also reduce calls on your time. The final questions relate to ensuring that the problem is successfully resolved.

When do we review this? What do we do to review this?

Expect them to feed back to the proper person if the situation is not resolving. The use of 'we' confirms that you are taking responsibility for the conversation. The proper person to feed back to may be elsewhere in the organisation but should be acceptable to both of you as an appropriate resource. A brief record of the outcome of the conversation can be added to your initial notes in case you need to refer to the conversation in future. This record can be filed with matters referring to the specific department, although if a senior manager or team leader has presented the issue then it can be helpful to keep the record in their personal file. It can be useful to refer to these notes at a later date, perhaps prior to future appraisals or if unexpected 'visits' to your office become frequent.

Discussion

Setting a review is an important step, as you wish to be sure that the problem is truly solved following your intervention. If you have misjudged the intervention, you need to know about it soon. It is not wise to give unresolved problems time to grow and to become more complex.

In general, these conversations last about five minutes. A week later you are likely to find that the problem has almost been forgotten. Of course, new problems with something else will have arisen, which is the nature of the world and of the world of management in particular.

Action-oriented transactions often take less than 90 seconds, so that conversations about specific decisions can be brief. 'Shall I put these here or there?' If the question has a known answer in the context of the participants then no more information is required. Such action-oriented planning is facilitated if participants are standing or walking. Some experienced managers conduct their weekly Monday morning reviews with all present standing up in order to take advantage of this phenomenon. In the armed forces, very few conversations take place in a seated position. Even military gaming is usually carried out in a standing position. In the same way, cocktail parties are largely standing affairs because their function is to maximise social contact. They are designed to encourage movement and mixing among the guests and to reduce lengthy and intellectual activities. The sitting position is more reflective therefore committee meetings and therapy sessions are mainly seated activities. The lying position is the most contemplative, thus it is used in hypnosis, in relaxation training and in the traditional free association of Freudian psychoanalysis 'on the couch' (Wainwright 1985). Yogic practitioners and those who teach meditation have made extensive comments on the differences between these postures.

A social contact sequence lasts four to five minutes, after which we know if we want further contact (Zunin 1972). If a conversation lasts less than this time, comments are made such as 'We did not have time to get to know one another' or 'We did not have enough time to discuss it'. Conversations and relationships are made up of successive sequences of a few minutes each. This means that in a business setting effective transactions need occupy only a few minutes. For example, learning about a proposed purchase can take much time, but formal price negotiation usually only takes four or five conversational exchanges.

The sequence described above for analysing and resolving problems takes long enough for your colleague to become calm and to feel that a conversation of sufficient length has taken place. They should leave believing that they and the situation have been taken seriously and dealt with appropriately. At the same time they will recognise that they themselves provided the means by which the problem was addressed. This is good for their self-confidence. They will have more confidence in a manager who accepts their unexpected arrival calmly and who requires concrete information at once.

As the manager, you have quickly gained enough information to move things forward, hopefully without leaving your chair. At the same time, you have clarified your understanding of interactions within your organisation. This information may be useful in the future. You only have to remember a minimum of information from the dialogue and thus it is easier to return to your previous task.

Studies of human interaction have shown that we make many decisions about people within seven seconds of setting eyes on them (Mehrabian 1981). Most of our major conclusions about them are reached within 90 seconds. In the street as someone approaches you will observe a number of clues such as dress, age and familiarity, which will determine how you greet or do not greet them as they approach closer. The importance of this for managers is that such instinctive responses may lead to poor relationships with or lack of information about key colleagues. So if there is a time in the day with no specific task, it can be useful for managers to go and talk to the person they would least like to spend time with. Surprisingly often, instinctive personal responses will turn out to have been inaccurate. This may not matter in social situations but it can be crucial in business and personnel matters.

Practical exercise

A good exercise to demonstrate this technique is to ask the trainees to work in pairs or in small groups with some acting as observers. Two play out in turn a recent situation from their workplaces, using the questions above. The observers and then the participants comment on the differences between this and their customary approach.

The situation below can be used for practising this dialogue if participants do not wish to use situations from personal experience. One participant takes the part of the health worker for an old lady. While living at home the old lady goes into local shops and takes things without paying. The shopkeepers do not regard the police as the appropriate resource to deal with this. They make complaints about the old lady to the health worker.

The old lady is admitted to hospital for assessment. The inpatient staff let her out for walks ‘because she is better’. She goes into the same shops. The shopkeepers complain to the health worker who did not know that she was being allowed out for walks and is annoyed. The health worker comes to complain to their manager about these events.

In discussion, ask all the participants to identify what one new thing each person has learned from this exercise.

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Yoram Galli

If it doesn't work, be someone else!

Keywords: solution focus, ontology, being, doing, having, identity, choice, coaching, first-order change, second-order change, paradigm, management.

Summary

The Solution-Focused (SF) Approach primarily focuses on creating solutions and working through to implement them. Focusing on what works is a critical path towards this achievement. To any SF coach, the phrase: "If it works, do more of it" addresses both his attention and the one of his client, to identify, to acknowledge and to develop more of what works. The approach suggests that "If it doesn't work, do something else!", thus making sure no one continues doing things that don't work. The quest, for both the coach and his client, is to find what else to do, so that "it will work".

But what if the solution cannot be found in doing something else?

What can replace the "doing something else"?

This paper offers another dimension: to move from the Doing dimension to the Being dimension, and so - from doing something else to being someone else.

Based on the practical experience of the author as a coach, this paper will demonstrate how the manager can work with the model with his subordinate and the coach with his client.

The background

SF is about creating solutions, acting to achieve them while focusing on what works as a critical path and, if it works, doing more of it. Those principles channel the attention of the 'Solutionist' and those he/she interacts with.

In their book, Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow say that change occurs in the doing mode or in the viewing mode: *"Change occurs when someone does something differently or looks at something differently".* [Jackson / McKergow, 2002: 16].

Albert Einstein's famous quote: *"No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew"*, suggests creating the solution at another, probably higher, level of consciousness. Consciousness in this paper will be referred to through synonyms, definitions and distinctions such as Paradigm, Mind Set, Mental Map, Perception, Listening and Basic Assumption.

If we accept that the solution is at another or different consciousness level, how does one move between those levels? Can a person really leave his level of consciousness for another?

Watzlawick et al [1974], in their book about change, differentiate between first-order change and second-order change. Changing a paradigm or moving up from one paradigm to another provides "real" change, the kind of change that is considered a transformation: a second-order change.

The SF approach suggests doing something else, and by doing so invites to a trial-and-error mechanism.

This produces the doing that could be either a first or a second order of change. It does not ensure a second-order kind of a change though it does lead to something that was not there before and so taking one step towards the Future Perfect.

This paper offers '*Being*' as a larger context to focus on, larger than Doing, larger than action taken (though there will always be actions taken). 'Being' creates, as it will be shown later, a more comprehensive and meaningful context for the actual doing.

The expressions of 'Being' are somewhat different in other known approaches, such as

1. The Ontology approach, which focuses on the "who" and "what" of the person (team, organization etc.) and his basic assumptions.
2. The Philosophy of Being as attributed to Martin Heidegger.
3. The art of Being as developed by Erich Fromm.
4. The advanced psychoanalytic approach, which focuses on the positive aspects of the self, looking at the positive narcissism by Heinz Kohut.

This paper will focus on the practical use of working with 'Being', without entering into the relations between the different approaches to 'Being'.

The Be-Do-Have model is presented as a working model for the manager as well as the coach.

The Be-Do-Have Model

In many publications, the link between Being, Doing and Having is presented linearly, where Doing is the linking stage between Being and Having.

The idea is that instead of asking oneself "what do I have to do in order to have what I want?" one would start by answering the question: "who am I?"

The known standard procedure is:

1. Define your Being;
2. Act out of your definition of your Being = Doing, and:
3. You will have results = Having.

Being → Doing → Having

Fig. 1

The main point here is to start with declaring who you are, your Being (instead of constantly focusing on Doing) and then you will have a different quality of results (Having).

This paper depicts the Be-Do-Have model (BDH) as three circles of identity zones.

As was presented in the workshop and the paper on “The Full Colours of Positive Feedback” [Galli, SOL 2005], all three elements (Be, Do and Have) are expressions of identity.

For example, when a manager is asked about his or her profession, and he or she answers “I’m the head of the department”, the next question might be, “What does this mean?”

Talking from the Have/Having identity zone (circle) the answer could be something like, “I have goals and objectives, I have deadlines to meet, I have a team of twelve professionals, I have a budget, I have an office, a company car and a mobile phone.” (Possession)

Talking from the Do/Doing identity zone (circle) the answer could be something like, “I prepare a work plan, I assign missions and tasks, I run team meetings, I follow-up the progress, I conduct customer surveys, I report to my CEO and I train my people.” (Performance)

Talking from the Be/Being identity zone (circle) the answer could be something like: “I’m the leader of the department, I am the brain and heart of the team, I am the host to my subordinates and customers, and I am the innovator of the company. (State of being)

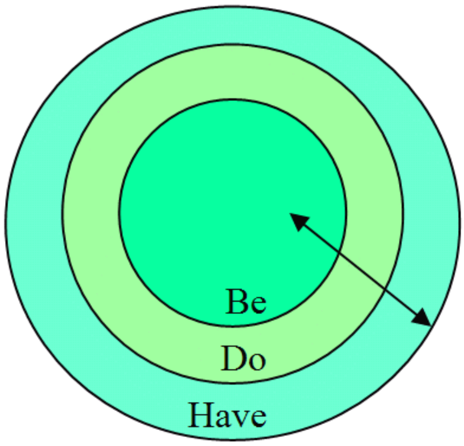

Fig. 2

The BDH model recognizes that, as human beings, we all move through all the three circles of BDH. The challenge is to get to know them all, to use them and, mainly, to develop the ability and skill of creating 'states of Being'. The creation of states of beings is a process which holds a higher value, even if it seems less tangible or more difficult to articulate. A basic assumption of this model is that the inner circle is higher in value and in level of consciousness. No one inhabits one circle (zone of identity) only, yet, many of us might reside in one circle more time than in the other two.

Moving to the 'Being' zone from the 'Doing' zone is the primary challenge.

It combines both

1. Doing something else, and
2. Doing it from another level of consciousness (probably: a second-order change).

Another aspect of this model is: moving from the internal circle ('Being') to the external one ('Having') is equivalent to moving from the inner core and the significant context to external aspects and actual objects.

A management team of an international company, located in the USA, assembled to study, review, evaluate and reflect upon its work, at the end of the year. The three hour session took place in the USA, and was filmed on video. The team decided to share their insights and their learning with the employees. The video cassette was therefore sent to the employees in the company sites all over the world. The management team presented both their achievements and their failures.

What captured most of the employees were the courage and the willingness of the management to openly share internal discussions with them.

What intrigued me the most was the team's different approaches they took to their successes and to their failures. Speaking of successes, they said: "We are who we said we would be. We are the leading company in our business. We are an example of 'Integrity': we practice what we preach. We said that we would focus on our customers and today we are really excellent in customer service."

Referring to what could be improved, the management admitted its failures: "We must be honest with ourselves. Along with our remarkable achievements, we have observed several failures: we had failures in responding to our customers promptly; we had failures in innovation and in developing new products; we had a failure in handling our operation in France and a big failure in providing a customer-oriented web site."

Positive aspects such as achievements were addressed in the 'Being' mode: "We are 'Integrity'" and not in the Having mode: "we had deliveries".

On the other hand, negative aspects, such as failures, were addressed in the 'Having' mode: "We had a failure in…" and not in the Being mode: "We are a failure", or even in the Doing mode: "We failed…".

In another area, the schools setting, the same idea was reported in Solution-Focused Education by Kerstin Mahlberg and Maud Sjoblom, where the positive paradigm is oriented towards the kid as a great person who really wants to learn and succeed - the 'Being' mode, while cases with "problematic pupils" are addressed through the act or the phenomena that the child has - the 'Having' mode: *"By externalizing the problem, it is separated from the child…It might then be easier to talk about how to get read of 'the Hulk'*('Having')*, than to talk about the fact that the pupil becomes very angry* ('Being') *so easily"*. [Mahlberg / Sjoblom, 2002: 318]

To summarize: the idea is that when a manager addresses the subordinate with something positive or something positive to strive for, it would be useful to be in the 'Being' zone, whereas addressing unwanted/negative behavior, it is suggested to refer to what the subordinate has.

The same goes for the interaction between a coach/consultant and his or her client.

The practical part

The main practical use of the BDH model for the manager (and for the coach) is that an alternative paradigm to doing something else whenever something doesn't work is to choose 'Being' as a replacement for the 'Doing', meaning, "If it doesn't work, do something else, and if doing-something-else doesn't work, then *be someone* else!"

Of course, one can go straight to the 'Being' mode: "If it doesn't work, be someone else."

In a Management Development Training Program for young women, in a workshop on assertiveness, there was a role-play between a young woman as a manager and a veteran secretary. The objective of the "manager" was to inform the "secretary" that due to the amount of work to be done not only wouldn't she be able to leave earlier as she had planned, but she would have to stay two extra hours.

Again and again the manager in the role-play was too soft, not at all assertive and very friendly. The trainer asked her to shout, as a way of doing something else. He also turned to the other participants asking them for ideas to contribute to the "manager", as in a brainstorming.

Nothing helped the "manager". She seemed helpless, and everyone felt it was a lost case. Then, all of a sudden, the trainer offered another option. "Now I want you to repeat the same conversation you had", he told her, "only this time I want you to *be a lion*!". That did the trick. The young manager "transformed" herself, and being a "lion" she roared her instructions to the "secretary" getting lots of applause from her fellow participants.

There are several ways to operate this mode of work, and here are two of them: A manager finds his worker stuck in a situation where he has tried different approaches with one of his customers and nothing has worked.

M: "Tell me what have you tried so far?"

S: "I offered the customer to handle it myself and he refused."

M: "What else did you try?"

S: "I invited him to lunch, to talk it over."

M: "And?"

S: "Nothing, he still wants the same thing he asked for at the beginning."

M: "It might be a strange question to you. Looking back at your performance, who were you? Who were you as a being?"

S: "I'm not sure. I think I came to the meeting with the customer as a nervous and jumpy being."

M: "Suppose you could create yourself differently, who would you choose to be?"

S: "Well… maybe I would hope to be more sure and confident, and feel some compassion!"

M: "O.K., so how about choosing to be a compassionate, confident person?"

S: "Sounds very good!"

M: "Wonderful, you're being great. Now say it like you mean it."

S: "Next time I see him, I will be a compassionate, confident person!"

M: "Wow! On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is: you being a fully compassionated and confident person, where are you right now?..."

And so on.

Declaring oneself as a 'Being' or as a new/other 'Being' creates a new paradigm that, as a context, influences the person and his/her surroundings and creates the desired change.

Quoting myself: *"You cannot become who you choose to be, remaining who you are"*, I can argue that walking-the-talk, already produces some of the desired change.

The effects are not solely in the actions (doing). They impact other people's perceptions and understanding.

George Bernard Shaw's statement in "Pygmalion" through Eliza Doolittle that *"The Difference between a flower girl and a princess is not how she acts, but how she is treated."*, shows how the difference of the 'Being' is expressed through the listening (the perception) of others.

Another way is to skip the phase of identifying the 'platform' mode of 'Being' and to aim directly at creating the future desired state of 'Being':

> M: "… So, I understand you tried everything and you don't know how to proceed."
>
> S: "Yes, I can't see what else I can do."
>
> M: "So maybe it is not about what else to do."
>
> S: "What else is there - what do you mean?"
>
> M: "Suppose we are two years from now, and everything goes very well.
>
> What is happening with you?
>
> Who are you as a person?
>
> What has changed in what you are?
>
> What is different in who you are?
>
> S: "I am a powerful leader in my team! I might also say that I am a high performer"
>
> M: "Wow, that's great! Now can you tell me, looking back two years, what made it possible for you to be who you are?..."

'Being' as an invented solution doesn't necessarily have to be an answer or a response to a problem. One can create a state of 'Being' for himself as part of his preparation for a concrete situation, meeting or project.

A management team of a major service unit, in a cellular phone company, held a series of meetings on how to improve the service the company provided for their customers.

They finally chose to focus on inventing themselves as a new state of 'Being'.

They declared that they would *be the host* to their customers.

This helped them to start looking at their customers as guests, without the need to conceptualize new procedures and formalities.

A new context - with new values - was created, ready to make the next small step.

A similar situation was reported at the international conference of SOL 2004. The Swedish team said that as part of their preparation, they asked themselves who they wanted to be, choosing to be a team of hosts for the participants. As a presenter and as a participant at that conference, I remember the feeling of being a guest.

Conclusion

So from now on, so it seems, the question can be not only “What else can one do?”, but also “What else can one be?”

As is said in the paper title: using it when the famous phrase (“If it doesn’t work, do something else”) don’t work. Use it as another option and another framework in your professional repertoire

Meet the challenge of identifying when to prefer ‘Being’ over ‘Doing’ and vice versa.

Whenever you find it might work better for the client, or for you as a coach, focus on ‘Being’

Use it, if it can be!

The supervision question for the ontological coach to ponder now is:

1. When to choose a state of ‘Being’ for himself in preparation for the coaching session.
2. When the SF coaching session seems stuck, when it is better to *do* something else as a coach, and when it is better to *be* someone else as a coach.

Thank you for being who you are!

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Mark McKergow & Michael Hjerth

Learning how to act simply in complex situations

Keywords: simplicity, training, elegance, functionalist, ikebana, Steve de Shazer

Summary

Simplicity is a key aspect of both the work of Steve de Shazer and the SF approach. However, conveying this simplicity to managers is not easy. In this workshop, Mark McKergow and Michael Hjerth will introduce activities and lead discussions to explore the role of simplicity in SF work, to help participants to think more simply about their own practice and to help convey these ideas to managers learning SF.

Introduction

Simplicity is a key aspect of both the work of Steve de Shazer and of the SF approach. Steve was described by Insoo Kim Berg as 'the man with Occam's Razor' (Berg 2004), and the ideas of acting minimally, making minimal assumptions and using language very carefully are central to this methodology. Steve himself was well-known for acting 'simple', even describing his therapeutic persona as 'de Shazer the stupid' (de Shazer 1994: 34).

Demonstrating the simple approach with a client is one thing, but talking about it can get very complicated (references to social construction and Wittgenstein being brought into play). De Shazer himself could appear reluctant to talk about it. He was known for his firmness in trainings, frequently responding 'I don't know' to questions which did not make sense within his understanding of language usage and SF practice. This approach was rigorous and certainly 'walked the talk'. However, we both observed many workshop participants being puzzled by this and finding it unhelpful.

Simplicity

If we look in the dictionary for a definition of simplicity, we find many uses of the word – for mathematics (simple equation, not involving terms higher than first order), for medicine (a simple fracture), and for finance (simple interest, not compounded). In amongst these we can find an entry relating to simple *ideas* – not complicated or elaborate or adorned or involved.

In a more philosophical contect, the concept of simplicity is associated with Occam's Razor. This principle, first defined by the English monk and scholar William of Occam in the 14th century, is usually rendered as *'it is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer'*.

This remark can be seen in the context of the philosphophy of the time. The dominant school of the thought, the Scholastics, were concerned to find more and more complicated explanations of the world and how it worked. The more complicated the idea, clearly the cleverer it was, and the most likely to be true. William railed against this, and articulated his idea that, on the contrary, the simplest idea - that with the fewest assumptions – which fitted the facts was preferable. This principle is part of philosophy, and also science, to this day. Excess assumptions are shaved off, as if with a razor, to reveal the truth.

Occam's Razor is often misunderstood. In a well-known example, creationists sometimes contend that their idea – God created everything – is very simple, and therefore is scientifically correct. Scientists contend that this is not at all simple – to postulate the existence of an omnipotent creator is a large move indeed, particularly when the world around us can be described in terms which do not require such a figure.

How is simplicity useful – to managers?

In the philosophical and scientific sense, Occam's Razor is used to pare away unnecessary assumptions to help determine the usefulness of different hypotheses or concepts – maximum explanation in minimum terms. In everyday management terms, this is not usually at the forefront of the busy manager's mind – most managers are more concerned with efficiency and effectiveness. One might say they want maximum results for minimum cost. However, these two considerations need not be at odds with each other.

In SF work, simplicity is taken as meaning maximum change for minimal talk and minimal use of time and resources. We find that this is welcomed by managers. Perhaps the fact that to do this they are also applying Occam's Razor in scientific and philosophical terms is a bonus?

Simplicity and Solutions Focus

In the context of SF practice, we can see the idea of simplicity reflected in all the things which SF practice does not (usually) do to get results, and which seem therefore to be unnecessary. These include:

Diagnosis of the problem

Examination of the cause of the problem

Interpreting the client's words according to a schema

Knowing better than the client about the client's life

Relating information from one case directly into another similar (but different) case

Referring to clients by their diagnosis ('does it work for alcoholics? Or for sales people?')

Speaking of mental processes as properties of individuals, or inside people

Talking in generalities and abstract terms about clients and with clients

Attempting to make detailed plans a long time in advance in an emergent world

Once we take Occam's Razor and shave these away, what is left? The simple, apparently naïve use of language that is SF practice. Only it isn't as straightforward as that.

The guiding principle of SF practice is to 'find what works and do more of it', and do do this with respect to each individual case. We cannot exclude the possibility that, in a given case, one of the 'unnecessary' elements in the list above may turn out to be useful. So, the finding of what works should be done with the most open of minds, perhaps the 'beginner' mind written about by Zen author Shunryu Suzuki.

Simplicity in action

As an observer, how would we identify simplicity in action? Acting simply does not mean doing as little as possible, it means doing as little as possible to achieve a particular result. So, we can't judge simplicity without the context of trying to achieve some end – to do nothing would always be very simple, but would not be connected to the context. Equally, it might also be thought simple to do the same thing again and again, even if it's not working, and expecting different results. Neither of these relate to the simplicity of SF practice.

Our simplicity is related to functionalism – the taking away of all ornaments or adornments which are not part of the functioning or purpose of the endeavour. There is an interesting parallel with ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. The method used is to remove stem after stem until what is left is in aesthetic harmony. The most elegant designs have few blooms, but in very carefully placed positions. More flowers do not automatically equal a 'better' arrangement. In the same way we might say that more ideas, assumptions, hypotheses do not make for a 'better' approach to change. There seems to us to be an element of elegance and aesthetics in SF practice, relating to this idea.

There may appear to be a potential conflict or contradiction in this description. If the endeavor is to coolly remove all adornments, this may not seem to allow for the role of chance or coincidence. One might think that this idea of messy randomness might interfere with the quest for simplicity. We think this is a misunderstanding – happenchance provides many possibilities for staying simple.

In his fascinating book The Luck Factor (Wiseman, 2004), British psychology professor Richard Wiseman gathered two groups of subjects, who rated themselves as particularly lucky or unlucky. He then set about examining how they managed to do this – what seems to lead to 'luck'

He found that, amongst other things, 'luck' was connected to the way people responded to the random possibilities presented to them in everyday life. The 'lucky' group were much better at noticing and utilizing these opportunities, whereas the 'unlucky' group would shy away. This kind of response to useful yet random events is also seen in swarm intelligence – those who attended SOL 2004 may remember the demonstration of computer ants finding and taking food. One ant finds the food by chance, and then releases a trail of pheromones for the other ants to find, which they do again by chance. Once these 'tracks that work' have been discovered and marked, however, the whole ant community swings into action and before long all the food is safely gathered.

This example shows a version of elegant simplicity. The simple rules of the ants are combined with random movement which provide a reliable and robust method to achieve a certain result.

How to be simple

What kind of information do we need to make things work? What is the simplest way to get it? The most fundamental way to us seems to be the distinction between information relating to 'when does it work' versus 'when does it not work'. Information about the problem contains much less useful information than information about what is wanted, the 'solution' in SF. This is the direct route – along which there may be many excursions and pitfalls.

However, when a client shows up with a problem, usually the things that go wrong are better known to them than things that go right. So, you have to ask questions to throw more light on what works. We observe than in other traditions people start by asking about why things became wrong in the first place - whose fault was it, what should we have done… These are not the simplest questions. Why not do directly to what's wanted and start to throw light on that. For example, if a meeting at work has gone badly, we can start to discuss how we would like the *next* meeting to be rather than focus on the last meeting (a detour), perhaps by asking what should we keep doing and looking for small steps.

This way of thinking also applies to organizations. If you have a plan with a lot of unnecessary elements, then that is not only inelegant, but it wastes your energy. The simplicity of SF offers us a way to remove some of the things and focus on others – for example look at the distant or ideal future and the first steps, and avoid wasting time on the details of the unknowable 'ant country' (Stewart and Cohen, 1997) of complex interactions in between.

One key distinction between problem-focused and solution-focused approaches lies in the 'information content' of statements relating to the problem (what is wrong) and to the solution (what is wanted). This is analogous to being hungry and going to the supermarket with a list of everything you don't need to make pancakes. This list would take a lot of time to compile and would be very long indeed – a real waste of energy. Compare this with the much shorter list of ingredients for pancakes. Not only is this list much more useful (assuming that you want pancakes), it also takes much less energy to compile. This is not only efficient in the managerial sense; it also frees you up to also consider another list, which is about possibilities – in this case things which *might* work well in pancakes. Staying simple provides more opportunity and energy for noticing possibilities and happenstance – one of the key behaviours of 'lucky people' in Wiseman's research.

There is a false assumption that we need to maximize knowledge, to know before we act. The simplest way is to know what we need to know (and how little we need to know) to act, and act knowing no more than that. People seem to want to collect as much data as possible, instead of asking what they need. One way to go on here is to scale the knowledge needed on a 0 – 10 scale, and work from that – in practice, people seem to have no sorting mechanism for the knowledge, and SF can provide one.

Sometimes people say to us 'But surely, sometimes you HAVE to look into the past?' For example, in the case of a major rail accident, there is usually an inquiry. This does not look simple, but we can shed some light on the matter by following the example of Wittgenstein and looking at how the inquiry is used. Usually, although people think of the inquiry as about 'never letting it happen again', it has many functions included providing a focal point, gathering information about what actually happened, assigning responsibility for legal purposes, acting a forum for affected people etc etc. These are not so much to do with finding out what to do next time as giving a focus to what's happening NOW – giving people something to do in response to a distressing event.

Conveying simplicity

To learn to act in this manner of elegant simplicity is one thing. But how to convey it to others, particularly busy managers, is quite another. To those accustomed to the usual ways of talking about problems and their resolution, it may appear naïve, ignorant and even completely stupid. So, how are we to convey these ideas?

Steve de Shazer made things somewhat easier for himself by always working in a defined context, therapy. When he was asked questions which presupposed some kind of different and less simple use of language, his reply of 'I don't know' was some kind of version of 'That doesn't make sense, that's not a useful question'. We might say that he was handing the control back to the questioner, so they could have another try. In his therapeutic work, this was the 'different kind of cleverness' of Steve. In a training context, this approach is certainly rigorous and 'walks the talk'. However, we observed many trainees found it unhelpful and frustrating, as what seemed to them to be sensible questions were apparently ignored.

Is there a better way to convey these ideas? We will address two possibilities here, a functionalist perspective and (briefly) a linguistic perspective.

A functionalist perspective

In the functionalist perspective, we start by thinking about what we are trying to do, and wondering how to do this simply, by using the minimum information. In conveying this, we might ask managers to consider what might be the most useful things to know, and work from there.

The use of scales is a case in point. Using a scale to focus on relevant information is a tool which is very condensed. For example, we may be interested in the difference between where things are now (maybe a five) and slightly better (a six). This difference between five and six contains a lot of potential information, of which we may not need all.

To take an example from everyday life at work: A common complaint in many organisations is the abundance of meetings. We frequently ask workshop participants if they ever find themselves in a meeting the purpose of which they are unsure. The response to this is usually a sea of nodding heads. We would suggest this is partly a result of confusing the reasons for a meeting with the purpose of the meeting.

The reasons for the meeting can be said to describe what has *led up* to the meeting. The purpose, on the other hand, describes what we hope the meeting will *lead to.* If the desired outcomes, purposes, of the meeting is not clearly understood among the participants in the planning of the meeting, we will not be able to use Occams' razor to set a useful agenda: to discuss only matters which contribute to the outcomes in a useful way. The agenda should be formulated from the purpose and not from the reasons.

One of the most useful things to do before or at the start of a meeting is to talk and think about the following 4 groups of questions

> Platform – what is the purpose of this meeting? What kind of event is it? What benefits are you seeking?
>
> Looking Forward – what do you hope to be able to do afterwards, what is the least that needs to happen, what effects are you hoping for, etc Getting an image of the preferred future, using time distortion
>
> Utilising – when have you done similar things before, how do you do them?
>
> Stepping the Scales – so what do you need to do NOW?

This kind of pre-work might seem like extra work, but what it is enable us to do is stay simple, and thus stay efficient. These four steps all contain useful information – allowing the manager to focus very quickly on useful things.

Staying focused on what's wanted

The Dalai Lama says that the recipe for happiness is simple – find what makes you happy and do more of it, find out what makes you unhappy and stop doing that. We think this has the same kind of simplicity. Not only that, it can be very practical.

Michael was taking to his son Daniel about his work with people who say they drink too much. He asked Daniel, *"What should I do with these people?"* Daniel said, *"If they drink too much they should stop".*

Yes...but that's the problem, they don't know how to do that."

"If they do something that's better than drinking, then they're not drinking. You should ask them 'what's better than drinking?'. Then they will have something else to do."

"And if they drink all the time…"

"Ask what they used to do that was better than drinking, and tell the do it again."

"And if they can't remember anything (as they are so drunk)?"

"Ask them what COULD be better than drinking, and try it!, and if it is indeed better, they could do that"

Note that none of this is about why they drink now. It focuses right onto the important issue, which is about what they want to do that is not drinking. It doesn't fall into the traps of looking for explanations, seeking diagnoses, $5000 words and so on. This is the same 'different kind of cleverness', we suggest.

A linguistic perspective

Another way into this different kind of cleverness is through ideas like the interactional view (devised by the Mental Research Institute in the 1960s) and social construction. Mark in particular has made various attempts to convey these by talking about them, with apparently little success. These are complex ideas, and talking about them soon becomes very complicated. Some trainees have even complained that they thought that SF was supposed to be about simplicity, and this is not simple at all!

So, we are coming to the conclusion that a functionalist perspective offers a useful way to talk about simplicity. Once some kind of simple practice has been learned, it may be possible to enter into discussions about other concepts of simplicity, like social construction. The functionalist metaphor is easy to get across, particularly to business people who are interested in making progress rapidly. It may be that added credibility can be gained by dropping in references to things like swarm intelligence, luck research and so on.

Our workshop

In the conference workshop Mark McKergow and Michael Hjerth will review both the aspects of simplicity within the SF approach, and more specifically the way in which this is communicated. Should we follow de Shazer's uncompromising line? How can we offer other kinds of response.which may be seen as more helpful when talking about the approach rather than just doing it?

The workshop will build participants' understanding of 'simplicity' in both conceptual and practical terms. Practically, we will explore the rigour with which Steve approached his work, and ways in which that rigour can help hard-pressed managers and consultants as they attempt to 'stay simple'. We will examine everyday SF tools to see how they are used to build simplicity, in response to the inevitable complexities of life.

After attending your contribution the participants will be able to:

Define the role of simplicity as it applies (we think) to SF practice.

Refine their own SF practice, to critically assess the simplicity of their work

Build new rigour into their practice, to do even more with even less

Be eager to get to work and try out some of their new simplicity in action at work

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Ferdinand Wolf

Creating Comfort Places in Discomfort Situations [1]

Keywords: setting, client relationship, complexity, conversation, defining goals

Introduction

Solution-Focused work in my opinion was created to deal with the complexity of language in transforming the complexity of situations in a conversational context. A main guideline to cope with this transforming process was Steve de Shazer's thoughts on disciplined observation in the conversational process (de Shazer 1988). This meant that overall one has to find out and to observe what his conversational partners try to tell you and even try to find out what they want from him. In that sense it is necessary to look for their every day experiences to work out differences in coping with their life. This process should lead to a conversation about what works and what does not work, and what are ideas of the kind that help establish to make change possible even through transforming working ideas and behaviour in difficult situations.

In working with different individuals in different contexts it can be interesting to look for "qualities" of adaptations of the Solution-Focused approach by professionals working with clients and managers managing such organisations

As working with clients in some sort of private practice (psychotherapy, coaching) you have the context markers of "professional" versus "client", "voluntarity" versus "mandation", negotiations and contracts about "commitments", "goals" and "fees". The important thing is the term "negotiation", which means that the client has an active part in defining the terms of working together. And this "negotiation" part is a significant point in Solution-Focused work, maybe taking place more easily in private practice.

In the fields of education, justice and clinical contexts you have to deal with rules and descriptions defining differences of "trained" and "not trained" ("schedule of education/training") , "normal" and "deviant" ("Codex") or "sane" and "insane" (DSM IV or ICD 10). These rules try to define and reduce complexity in situations, where the terms of "uncertainty" or "danger for self and others" could be a topic and in situations where the needs of society are touched.

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[1] This title was inspired by a case presentation done by Jim Wilson at the EBTA Conference 2005 Salamanca/Spain on September 23rd 2005.

So how does it happen, that such differentiation attempts could guide thinking and behaviour in a Solution-Focused way in institutional work?

First it is necessary to look at the context. Educational, judical and clinical contexts seem to have clear structures with hierarchy, prescribed patterns of information, documentation, behaviour and evaluation. On the one hand the work of professionals in these contexts could be defined as a "saving process". This means that clients for instance in judical and clinical contexts are given some sort of a "factor of uncertainty" that has to be stabilized, to save the client and to save the society. In educational contexts maybe it is the factor of missing knowledge that has to be reduced.

In a second part it is the relationship, which we have to mention, when we discuss working with clients and managing an organisation of that type. When a person is working in such contexts, what does he/she think what his/her directions and what his/her opportunities are?

The goal finding procedure is mostly characterized by a situation, where one is the expert and the other is the trainee, client or patient, who depends on what the expert is diagnosing and planning for the common work depending on the rules of the institution or organisation. This is to some extent what Insoo Kim Berg described as the problem solving process in distinction to the solution building process (De Jong & Kim Berg 1998).

The managers of such organisations have to deal with the "functioning" of the organisation maybe in relation to political issues and needs. All the practitioners could have the image of a relationship, which is defined by a different state of knowledge and in relation to that by a different state of power.

In my practice in such contexts it is an interesting fact how to acquire Solution-Focused attitudes and developments, when you decide on what part you are working on. Do you work on removing "objective" difficulties or do you work on establishing a new sort of communication?

The first direction seems to stress overall a more "positivistic" attitude in working on alternative situations to the "objective" problem, which to a great extent is determined by the rules of the institution. Especially in contexts related closely to legal issues it seems to be self evident to have in mind how the client/patient is concerned with questions of legality, for instance if he is consuming illegal drugs. But the direction is not only to remove the problem. It is important to establish a state of coping in the absence of former habituation by focusing alternative feelings, thinking and especially doing (Isebaert 2005)

The second direction in such contexts goes on in establishing an alternative sort of communication in the sense of a "constructivistic" attitude. This focus could be seen mostly in connection to the so called "problem determined systems approach" (Anderson & Goolishian 1988), which in Solution-Focused manner means a strength focus on relationship type questioning to overcome blockades and stuck thinking leading to alternative views (see Wilson's term of being "de-centered", Wilson 1998), which opens possibilities in creative thinking and furthermore in alternative behaviour too.

Both directions in my opinion are capable as Solution-Focused practice in dealing with different goals, which on the one hand can be defined by society (outside of the client) and on the other hand can be defined by the client himself out of his actual needs.

As a Solution-Focused practitioner you have to have both possibilities in mind to find a way between "public" needs (represented by an organisation that has to take care on it) and actual needs of the client, which is the space where conversations around solution building can go on up to achieving change and progress.

Solution-Focused managing in such contexts has to organize space for discussing and adapting rules towards specific solution building processes for clients. This means that rules in organisations with "definition power" have to be seen as "work in progress" and not as stable unchangeable systems. So for instance it could be possible, that you have to negotiate the range of possibilities within and between organisations, who are concerned with specific legal or clinical topics. In my own practice as a Solution-Focused surveyor in the field of child protection and youth welfare I intended regular meetings with judges as to calibrate our doing on experiences in actual work with mandated persons, to open the range of possibilities for individual solution building between public (legal) and personal needs as an opportunity for a higher commitment in changing "bad" habits. This way is possible, when Solution-Focused practitioners mention their own potential in leaving their usual paths in direction of rejecting hypotheses and usual habits almost dealing with "creative misunderstandings" (De Shazer) and open minded attitudes. A way to move in this direction could be seen in Steve De Shazer's proposals of breaking down global frames (De Shazer, 1988, p.102) like:

- Listening closely and carefully asking questions
- Attempting to introduce some doubt about global frames
- Searching for a piece of the frame's construction upon which a solution can be built

In addition to these proposals the complimenting phase in Solution-Focused work as an attempt to show respect to client's efforts to cope with difficulties could be seen as establishing a comfort place in Solution-Focused dialogue. This is according to my experience the most effective way to get related to the client and to open the space for collaboration and change. But even in a Solution-Focused networking process between professionals and organisations the complimenting phase is the main procedure to get a working base in a support system. So therefore the creation of comfort places as dealing with respect to each other is an inevitable condition to get on track with Solution-Focused work. It depends not only on the situation but much more on the ability to reflect upon and maybe withdraw one's own hypotheses and prejudices.

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Research on Effects of Solution-Focused Work in Organisations

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Effects of SF training on productivity and leadership behaviour

Keywords: solution-focused training, coaching, evaluation, productivity, leadership, performance indicators, effects, study, research

Introduction

Recently the transfer of the "solution-focused approach" (de Shazer 1988) into the field of management can be seen in many applications in HR-Management, leadership, team-management, marketing and sales and so on (McKergow/Clarke 2005, Berg/Szabo 2005, Lueger 2006). But there are only few studies which investigate the effect of solution-focused work in organizations (see Sparks 1989 for effects on leadership behaviour) and up to now there has been no research concerning the effects on productivity in organizations.

The following research study was carried out at the PEF – University for Management, Vienna. The study examines the effect of solution-focused leadership training on behaviour and productivity which was carried out in the first part of the year 2005 at a Norwegian production plant in the fast-moving consumer goods industry. The target group of the training is shift leaders at a middle management level responsible for operations in the area of production and maintenance, who are in charge of 72 shop-floor workers.

The goal of the present study was to accompany a solution-focused leadership training and coaching programme, which was meant to deliver first results in some areas within a short time and to measure the changes in behaviour of the training participants. The objective was to establish how far this type of leadership training is able to actually bring about changes in behaviour and productivity with the purpose of meeting the growing challenges presented by management development training as well as the demands on the effectiveness of training measures.

Evaluation and solution-focused training approach

The training was conducted by two Swedish trainers according to the theoretical and practical paradigm of the solution-focused approach, which was developed at the Brief Family Therapy Center (de Shazer/Berg). This approach has its roots in psychology and psychotherapy. Nevertheless, the ideas that are central to the solution-focused approach have been launched into the world outside the boundaries of therapy and have been applied to different contexts. A trend can be observed in using this method more and more in a business environment, as one of the biggest advantages is that it works with small steps which offer significant changes that can be noticed after a short period. However, brevity is not the original aim of this approach. The concept of helping people create solutions and enhance the way organizations and companies work appears to be useful also in the area of management development, even though this presents a totally new development in the area of business.

The training was assessed on the basis of the evaluation model of Donald Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick 1959), which enables to verify the consequences and the effects of the training on four levels, namely reaction, learning, behaviour and results. The present research firstly intended to find out which were the effects of the above-mentioned training in relation with behaviour and productivity.

The following hypotheses were examined and are the aims of this evaluation study:

The solution-focused leadership training will cause a difference in several dimensions in the interaction between the training participants and their subordinates (-> behaviour)

Considering the level of results, improvements are expected as the goal of the company for the training is the improvement not only in leadership behaviour, but rather in several dimensions of results according to the evaluation concept of Kirkpatrick (productivity indicators).

Training goals

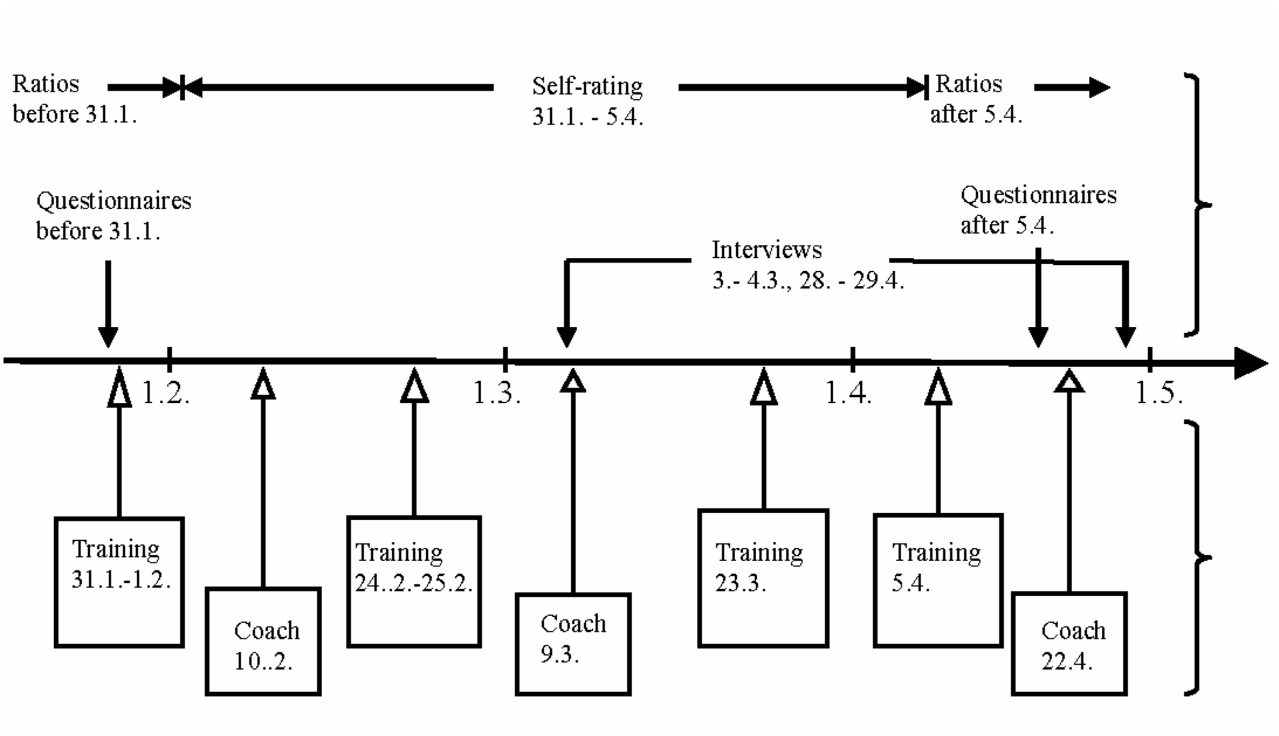
As the vision of training effects have been defined, the goals for the training were developed both from the company's point of view and from the trainers' point of view. The company's aims for the solution-focused training derived from overall goals according to the strategy of the company and especially in the area of production.

Deriving from the company goals and the solution-focused approach, the trainers built up the goals and the structure for the solution-focused training. Their aim was to educate and coach key personnel responsible for production in solution-focused methods and ideas. The goal for the training and coaching of key staff was to be able to measure different effects in human resources among employees on production lines. This training aimed to produce positive results, both in aspects of human resources and production figures.

Structure and timetable of the leadership training and evaluation instruments

In order to achieve the evaluation goals, the evaluation design encompassed four different instruments: Qualitative interviews, self-rating forms and questionnaires (including subordinate perception of 55 employees and self-perception of the trained team leaders). Productivity ratios of the management information system offered hard figures on the level of results in the production. Measurement of the instruments was done before, during and after the training, starting in January 2005 and ending in

June 2005. The timetable of the training sessions and the evaluation is shown in the following table:



Concerning the level of results, five different ratios, “returns by customers”, “absence”, “loss of packaging material”, “faults in production” and “the Overall Equipment Efficiency”, were used to find indicators for differences due to the solution-focused training. All these figures have in common that they depend on various different factors. Therefore, a Swedish production plant, using the same production process, was ideal as a control group for the interpretation of the development of these five ratios.

Results of the evaluation study

Concerning changes on the level of leadership behaviour due to the solution-focused training, six different dimensions, “communication”, “time management and workload”, “motivation and satisfaction”, “leadership abilities” and “employee competence and integration” have been investigated.

The dimension of communication, consisting of the parameters “communication style”, “giving feedback” and “information flow”, was strongly influenced in a positive way by the solution-focused leadership training. The training affects changes in several aspects which were consistently visible in all evaluation instruments. Concerning the communication style, indicators for a considerable change in communicating differently or even "solution-focused" are observable in the self-ratings, interviews and questionnaire. The subordinates of the team leaders perceive an improvement with a tendency towards significance. Giving more and different feedback was another goal in the self-rating set by the team leaders. Indicators for a high increase for this aspect are given in the interviews, with a tendency to significance in the perception of the subordinates. In general, they valued the frequency and not the quality of the feedback given. Evidence for an improvement towards a better communication flow is mainly provided in the interview section. As the team leaders worked on the improvements of communication on different levels, no change was recognizable from the subordinates' point of view.

The change in communication can be illustrated in the perceptions of the trained team leaders deriving from the interview series in this paragraph: *"[...] I ask them (questions) in another way than before [...] when the people are answering you can see the difference…they seem to like that better and they answer me much better [...]"*. They worked on different aspects of positive communication*:"[...] I have a different tone, a little different attitude when I talk to them, a little bit more positive when I speak to people and I think they notice that [...]"* even if it does not seem to be that easy to transfer it into practice because *"[...] to ask questions in a different way [...] it is very difficult, you have to practice, practice and practice [...]"*.The focus in the aspect of giving feedback was especially on giving positive and individual feedback: "*[...] give more positive response to each, not to the whole group [...]"*. This is mirrored in the significant increase in the rating of the employees in the questionnaires. The superiors also tried to build on already existing positive actions of the employees according to the basic assumptions of the solution-focused approach by giving positive feedback to them and consequently they assume an increase in productivity: *"[...] one evening I went to her and said, yesterday the OEE was very good. It is the best I have seen [...] then I saw a smile [...]"*. Another intention of the participant in giving feedback was to *"[...] open this wall [...]"* and effect better communication between them and their employees.

Covering the topic of *"time management and workload"* the results are controversial at a first glance. On the one hand the team leaders worked on structuring their daily work differently and more effectively and it seems that they have succeeded. On the other hand both target groups of this questionnaire, the training participants and the employees, stated that their workload increased. This can be traced back to more reflecting communication of the training participants and to the implementation of a total production management system during the time of measurement.

The participants stated that they were now able to structure their working routines in a better way and *"[...] planning [...]* their *shift in a different way"* instead of a *"[...] burn-out start [...]"*. They also *"[...] leave other stuff beside and focus on what I am hired for doing."*. Despite the slightly increased level of workload according to the questionnaires, the participants have a lower stress level according to the interviews: *"[...] Now I come home at the same time but I am not so tired when I come home [...] I have solved the problems in a different way [...]"*; *" so that's much easier [...]"*; *"[...] I feel more comfortable now [...]"*; *"I feel my working situation is much* *easier"*. For a more detailed insight into this area it would be interesting to carry out further studies which concentrate on time management and workload in connection with a solution-focused leadership training.

In the area *"motivation and satisfaction",* the evaluation instruments give less information about changes. No significant changes could be recognized within the results. Probably the announcement of a possible reduction in staff in the context of the company negatively influenced this dimension during the same period.

When analysing *the dimension of "subordinate competence and integration",* some effects are indicated. Even the team leaders are delegating more tasks to their subordinates and, according to the interviews, value the competence of their subordinates a little bit higher, they stated in the questionnaire that they are less competent. The team leaders also integrated their subordinates more in the decision-making processes. This is illustrated in the interviews through examples. Looking at the questionnaires, slight improvements can be observed but no significance occurs. Concerning proposals for improvement made by the subordinates, the self-ratings show that the team leaders want to create an atmosphere that enables this and they tended to implement their proposals for improvements to a higher extent. In the interview examples are provided and the subordinates notice, due to the questionnaire, a slight but not significant improvement.

As a result of the solution-focused leadership training, the training participants feel more comfortable in their role as team leaders, according to observations from the interviews and the significant results of self-perception in the questionnaires.. A significant increase in their *leadership abilities* due to the evaluation of their subordinates was observable and can be highlighted as a *major change in the level of behaviour*. The following figure illustrates the significant change (level of significance 0.057) in rating of the question *"How do you rate the abilities of your superior to fulfil his current position?"* assessed by the subordinates of the training participants.

			date of measurement	
			before the training	after the training
	very satisfying	amount	2	3
		% at the date of measurement	3.6%	5.5%
	satisfying	amount	14	23
		% at the date of measurement	25.5%	41.8%
	neutral	amount	23	19
		% at the date of measurement	41.8%	34.5%
	dissatisfying	amount	14	9
		% at the date of measurement	25.5%	16.4%
	very dissatisfying	amount	2	1
		% at the date of measurement	3.6%	1.8%
	total	amount	55	55
		% at the date of measurement	100.0%	100.0%

The above-presented result will be underlined with statements of the team leaders out of the interview series: “In my position as a leader it feels better, absolutely.”; “I feel the job as a team leader is a little bit easier to do”; “[…] I got more self-confidence, since I started the course.”; “I am more self-confident […]”. Nearly every one of the training participant feels more self-confident and therefore more comfortable in his role. This is mirrored in the results of the questionnaire. Feeling more comfortable as team leader has not necessarily any influence on the leadership abilities. However, the interviews illustrate that the team leaders changed their leadership behaviour, which was also valued by their subordinates (compare the above figure). On the one hand they spread the idea behind the solution-focused approach as “[…] learning them (employees) to face solutions instead of trouble.”. On the other hand they act differently, meaning that they “[…] changed some of my behaviour, because when we are discussing something and they attack me with something. I just do not attack back, instead I discuss it with the people. We can discuss this in a good way, not fighting about this.”. The interaction between the training participant and the employees changed: “[…] before I said: ’You should know that!” all the time. Now I try to help them more the way they feel, so I can take small steps to make them understand what I mean.”.

Referring to the level of results, according to Kirkpatrick’s approach it can be stated that in two areas, “returns by customers” and “faults in production”, a high effect and reduction due to the solution-focused training can be observed, whereas in “absence” a low effect and “loss of packaging material” no effect could be recognized. This perception can be traced back, on the one hand, to the change of the development of these ratios within the management information system compared to the control group during the time of measurement. On the other hand, many examples were found showing an improvement in these areas in the qualitative interviews:

A team leader illustrated the example where a woman who is in charge of filling the product on the line solved the problem of chips with too much spice. She suggested mixing it with other, spice-free chips in order to receive a good quality product. “[…] it was a good idea and we don’t have to throw it away. […] So she saved money for the company.”. The participant does not exactly know if the circumstances that the woman comes up with this idea for improvement can be traced back to a more open atmosphere and therefore to the solution-focused training. But he stated that communication improved between him and the woman since attending the solution-focused training.

This example is also connected to other results and may be regarded only as an indicator, as some of the training participants also mentioned that they perceive their English as not sufficient to offer all examples of change. However an improvement (blue/bottom-line with a downward trend) compared to the development in the control group (purple/top-line with an upward trend) in the area of returns by customers is clearly observable.

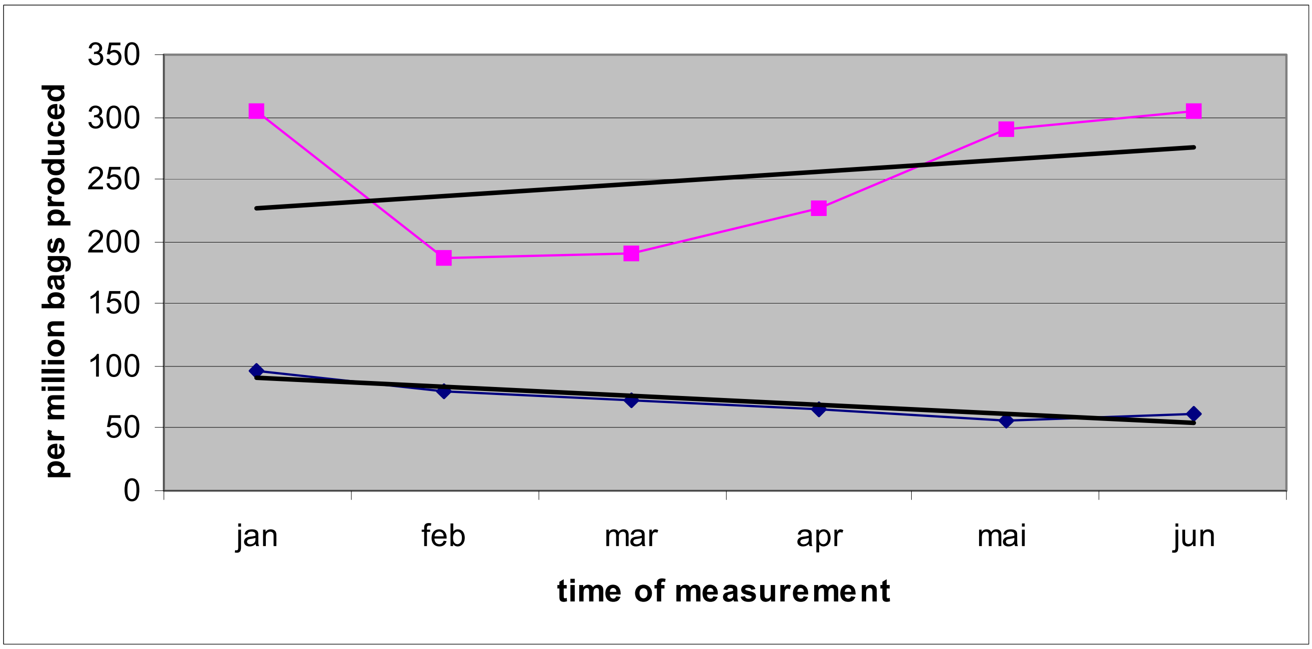


Figure: Returns by customers – trend analysis

Another example mentioned by a training participant is connected to the ratio of "absence". The team leaders revived a so-called sick-leave café. Its expectations are illustrated in the following statement: *"[...] It's very important to meet them, because if they are away from work for a long time and when they are ready to work again, they are afraid to start to work. And if we talk once a month then you have the connection with them."* and the reaction *"It's very good. Because one other person who was here now and had never been at this café before and he was nervous, so when he went he smiled."* .

This *example* shows that the team leader comes up with or revives certain ideas and in their implementation the solution-focused approach helped them and gave them more self-confidence in doing things. Summarizing it can be said that the reduction of absence cannot be directly traced back to the solution-focused training even if the team leaders work on it, as sick leave depends on many also exogenous factors.

According to the interviews, a change in behaviour can be observed, as the team leaders deal differently with the mistakes made by their subordinates. They try, through this different, solution-focused manner, to remind the subordinates of their responsibilities. *"A concrete example is, if they forget to put the date on the packages. Before I was 'Hey, you have to do that. What have you done!' Now I try to say 'What have we done? What can we do to make it better?' [...]"*. Such changes in behaviour may lead also to a reduction of material used and therefore cost, in the long run. The following figure shows the results concerning the development of faults in production in the company examined.

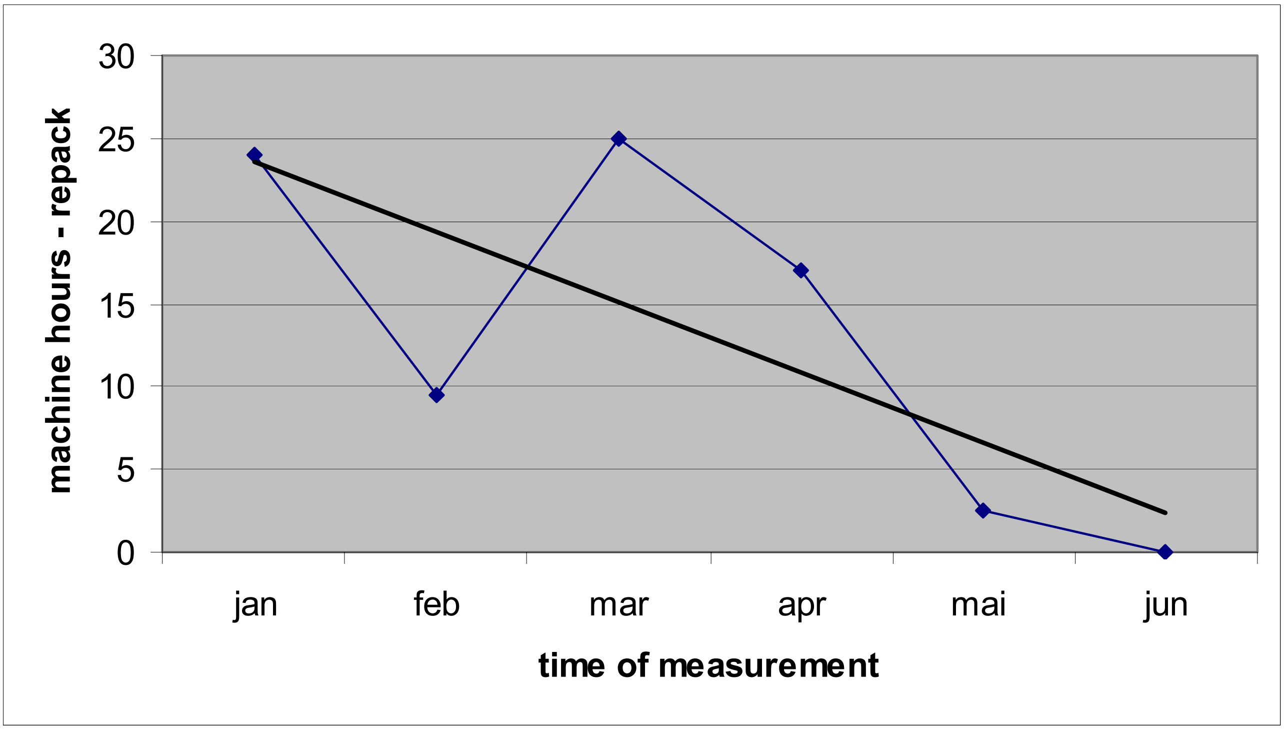


Figure: Faults in production – analysis (without control group)

The overall ratio of "Overall-Equipment-Efficiency" (OEE) showed no changes during the study. It is to assume that this ratio is influenced to a higher extent than the other ratios by various factors. However, some examples described during the interview series are indicators that possible future impacts of this training on productivity may be recognised: *"A practical improvement on the line, was a person who came up with how to improve the seasoning process to the super-chips – pellet chips – how to improve the seasoning because when you put the seasoning in, dust comes out and you have to clean all this area. And someone came up with an idea how to improve, to have a better control of the dust, to keep it down – this big thing that's going around. So the maintenance guys had them to make a drawing of how this should look like. One thing led to another and that's the way how they improve by picking up ideas from the employees. That happened last Thursday.*".

The illustrated example indicates small improvements in the area of productivity as these developments were implemented a short time before the last interview series were carried out; it can be assumed that more improvements are following. The effects may be mirrored in the productivity ratios with a certain time-lag.

Conclusion

Summarizing the results, it can be recognised that the solution-focused leadership training carried out in the production plant creates significant improvements on the level of leadership behaviour as well as on the level of hard facts like productivity. Concerning the leadership behaviour, the results are consistent with the study of Sparks (Sparks 1989). However, the results can be seen as first indicators and further studies have to be conducted because the sample of the trained managers was small.

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Carin Mussmann

Solution-Focused leadership: The range between theory and practical application

Keywords: Solution oriented leadership, appreciative observation, reflection on leadership

Summary

The systemic Solution-Focused approach is becoming more and more important for organizations that work with goal agreements. Social institutions, whose educational concepts are quite close to the solution oriented brief therapy, find this leadership approach increasingly attractive. “What does Solution-Focused leadership mean for a manager and how does it show in their day-to-day work?” This was the central question we asked in five departments of a mental institution in the area of living and working. We went looking for an answer using interviews, questionnaires and on-the-job observations. During the observations another manager of a different department was always present. After the interviews and the observations the participating managers always got feedback. This method of appreciative job observation shows to what extent it can be used to trigger a reflecting discussion among the managers. The employees gave their feedback in questionnaires. With the results of this study, conclusions for applications and limits of using the solution-focused approach within a leadership context can be drawn. Out of the feedback of the pilot study, reflection and discussion emerged which induced principles for solution-focused leadership, and for solution oriented clients' care.

The claim to work in a solution-focused manner

"I understand solution oriented work as work where the focus isn’t on the problems but on the solutions. These solutions get sought-after together or the vis-à-vis gets encouraged doing that independently. For me, solution oriented also means that I don’t approach a situation with a fixed idea in mind but with the mindset that the other person knows what is good for him or her. I have to be open for other agendas. … Solution oriented means to go forward in small steps.”

With these words the division manager of SPEKTRUM of the psychiatric clinic in Basel, Switzerland, describes solution-oriented work. In 1996 she was put in charge of a department which had been outsourced from the direct hospital service and merged into the division “Living, Habitation and Work”, with the goal to make a life outside the hospital possible for former in house patients. The divisional management set the goal to implement the solution-oriented approach right from the beginning. She initiated training in solution-oriented work for the department management and other interested employees. In 2005, the divisional manager had the impression that only a few elements of the training were actually transferred into the everyday work. She located a particular need for action and potential for improvements in the area of leadership. Since all of the department managers are well experienced in their positions, it was important to find a procedure which would be acceptable to everyone and enable an appreciative feedback on the implementation of the solution-oriented approach. The following question had to be answered: "What do managers think about solution-focused work and how can it be determined whether they actually act in a solution-oriented manner?"

Description of solution-focused leadership (in literature).

Ten criteria which describe solution-focused work were chosen. These criteria guided the analysis of the interviews and observations. The main objective in selecting the criteria was to determine observable aspects of solution focus in the managers' activities and behaviours.

1. Solution solving: The manager doesn't have to analyze the problem in order to solve it. Nevertheless, managers acknowledge the difficulties someone may have with a specific situation and focuses on the solution instead of on the problem. This can be observed by their actions: if it isn't broken, they don't try to fix it, but if something is not working, they look for another way of doing things. They talk about solutions instead of problems and encourage the employees to find their own solutions. (Cauffmann & Berg, 2002)

2. Humanistic perspective: The basis for this kind of leadership is a humanistic perspective. Employees are seen as active, they construct their own sense of living, they are endowed with adequate resources, and their behaviours are autonomous and can only be influenced to a limited extent. Solutions and decisions are developed together and not "commanded from above" or decreed. (Bamberger, 2001)

3. Resource-orientation: The individual resources of each employee are important for finding solutions. This can be observed in the focus on strengths and qualifications of the employees in discussions. Instead of long discussions about failures and weaknesses, in difficult situations the focus is on past successes and exceptions (times when it was less difficult). (De Jong & Berg, 1998; Baeschlin & Baeschlin, 2001)

4. Extending the range of actions: Managers foster and expand the range of actions for their employees by creating a setting of positive general conditions. Employees are encouraged to act largely independently. (Steinkellner, 2005)

5. Respect and appreciation for employees build the ground for a trustful collaboration. Managers display this respect in discussions by listening to and accepting the individual perception of their employees. They do not impose their own views and interpretations on others. (Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003)

6. Reflection: Managers find themselves in a constant process of learning and development. They take time to reflect and adapt their actions to the particular situation. (Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003)

7. Future-orientation: The manager sees the future as something that is negotiated and created. Their statements develop future scenarios and actions rather than analyze past failures. They initiate "act-as-if" experiments and encourage employees to think about what they can do to create a new and different future. (Cauffmann & Berg, 2002, Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003)

8. The development of goals is the essential of leadership. These should be seen as clear, realistic and reasonable. The manager encourages the discussion about meaning and purpose of organizational and individual goals. (Radatz, 2003)

9. Active communication: Leadership means communication. A solution-focused communication enhances the discovery and development of solutions. Solution-focused questions and communication styles make communication and mutual understanding easier. Managers enable their employees to find new possibilities for action by providing support through orientation and compliments. (de Shazer, 1989, 1997; Hargens, 2005)

10 Relevant to the context: Solution-focused managers avoid the pitfalls of simplified solutions by keeping the context and the complexity of a difficult situation in mind. This can be observed within the conversations: there is no rash focus on a simplistic solution. They take the general conditions, (side) effects and also the organizational interconnectedness into account. (Cauffmann & Berg, 2002, Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003)

Solution focus is an attitude that managers have as well as a way of working. It can be observed in the open way managers deal with different opinions and perceptions, in their respect for others, their ability to trigger changes in behaviours, their ability to appreciate performance, their trust that employees have resources to solve problems in an adequate way, and their capability to hand over responsibility. We see that solution-focused leadership is not just an application of the solution-focused approach; it's more about engaging in a solution-oriented mindset.

The initial Pilot Study

Three methods were used to answer the 2 questions posed. Partially structured interviews were used for self-evaluation by the managers. Appreciative Feedback and the employee questionnaires were used to show the managers how their actions were seen by others.

Sample Groups	Interviews	Observations	Questionnaires
Division Manager	1		
Department Manager	5	5	
Staff			29
total	**6**	**5**	**29**

Tab. 1: Sample Groups and Investigating Methods

How managers describe solution focus

During the interviews the five division managers all stated that the development of goals is a part of solution-focused work. Those department managers who found the internal training reasonable and useful felt motivated to engage with the solution-oriented approach and to work with it. They showed an extensive understanding of leading and working in a solution-focused manner, which could be expressed with the following criteria:

They focus on solutions and consider existing strengths and resources.

The development of goals and small steps is important.

People feel that they are appreciated and get respect. Working principles contain praise and recognition.

They emphasize the importance of open communication. Difficulties and conflicts get addressed, active listening and giving feedback is important.

They take time for regular discussions and use solution-oriented language.

They aim to expand the number of different options for action available to their employees and clients.

The following statements illustrate this from a more practical perspective.

"To me solution-focused means not to decide for other people. I leave a lot of free space for my employees. All of my employees are professionals. Over the years I've discovered with my two employees that I respond solution-focused if someone approaches me with suggestions or criticism by asking: Ok and how would you do that, what are your thoughts about it? I try to delegate in a positive way. ... Solution-oriented also means to meet people where they are, or to put their moral concepts – instead of my own – in the centre of the discussion and to take those as the benchmark. I think that's more accurate.» (E)

«What is also important to me is that one is very open within conversations ... that conflicts get addressed. Furthermore, it is crucial that employees learn to listen. So that I notice what the other says and we can work in this way together. Then you can always check what small next step could be agreed ... working with the solution-focused approach also needs clear structures in the beginning. This is very important. It needs a frame, a clear concept and structure, which of course have to be followed. Within this general framework, solution-focused work is possible but structures need to be in place. That's absolutely crucial, I think.» (C)

«Acting solution-focused to me means engaging clients in the process and not imposing on them something they perhaps don't understand or which doesn't make any sense for them. It has to make sense for them, clients need to understand and it has to be doable. It also means not to always see the illness, the negative, the limitations, but primarily focus on the healthy part, the positive methods of resolution. Reframing is a good means to get from a problem-focused attitude to a solution-focused perspective. It often becomes easier to deal with a difficult situation when I have observed it from a different angle. Further resources or tools like the miracle question or scaling questions can be useful to reach the goal. The solution-focused approach is always goal oriented and the goal can only be named by the available resources. We always work goal oriented.» (A)

Comparing the statements of the division managers with those of the department managers we see that the division manager explicitly focuses on solutions instead of on problems. Department managers display their solution-focused understanding in the techniques used and their attitude. They pay respectful and appreciative attention to people, work with praise and recognition, develop goals and small steps, make use of resources, and build trust with solution-oriented language.

Where solution orientation shows up

In each observation of the five department managers another manager from a different department was present. The observations were planned so that the results of the observations were in a certain range and the description and feedback could be given without having the character of an assessment. To achieve this, a guideline for appreciative observation was developed. It consisted of three observation aspects with a number of keywords giving an indication of solution-focused behaviour.

The aspects are:

How conversations are conducted

The interaction with employees and clients

How difficult situations are handled (see appendix 1)

The observers accompanied the managers during their jobs for around three hours. After the observations, the managers received feedback and the observers notes were compiled in written form. Finally the results of the observations were shared among the all of the managers. This exchange led to a reflection of the activities observed as well as to a discussion about the understanding of solution-focused work.

Results of the observations

In all observed situations, solutions and goals were developed instead of analyzing problems or asking "why questions". The managers supported their employees and clients in finding solutions by themselves. They also showed respect and appreciation. The achievement of goals was always seen as the responsibility of the employee/client. A solution-focused attitude was observed especially in the interaction with clients.

As an example we chose a conversation with a client: The procedure was structured by a solution-focused guideline for conversations. After a short overview of the coming half hour conversation the division manager referred to former conversations and asked what the client could remember. To start with, a scaling question about the well being of the client was asked. Again, a reference to the last evaluation was made. The manager explicitly passed the responsibility for taking the initiative and action to the client. She let her evaluate the current situation and her past successes and gave positive feedback about the achievements. The manager made sure that the client was setting the goals by herself and asked: "What will you do in order to achieve your goal?" There was a short-term and a long-term goal. (E)

Interactions with the employees also displayed many solution-focused behaviours. In difficult situations it became apparent that the managers took responsibility and offered structure and orientation. The following observation exemplifies leadership:

An employee talked about a client who sexually harassed a patient of the hospital, which resulted in massive complaints. The employee was uncertain about the way he should react. The department manager informed him about the legal situation and asked which possibilities he had thought about and their consequences. They developed a strategy together and the department manager made sure that the employee felt able to act on his own. Afterwards the employee was asked to present his proce-

dure in the next team report. The department manager supported the employee in this situation without taking away his autonomy.

The observations confirmed the results of the initial interviews and showed a number of capabilities of the managers:

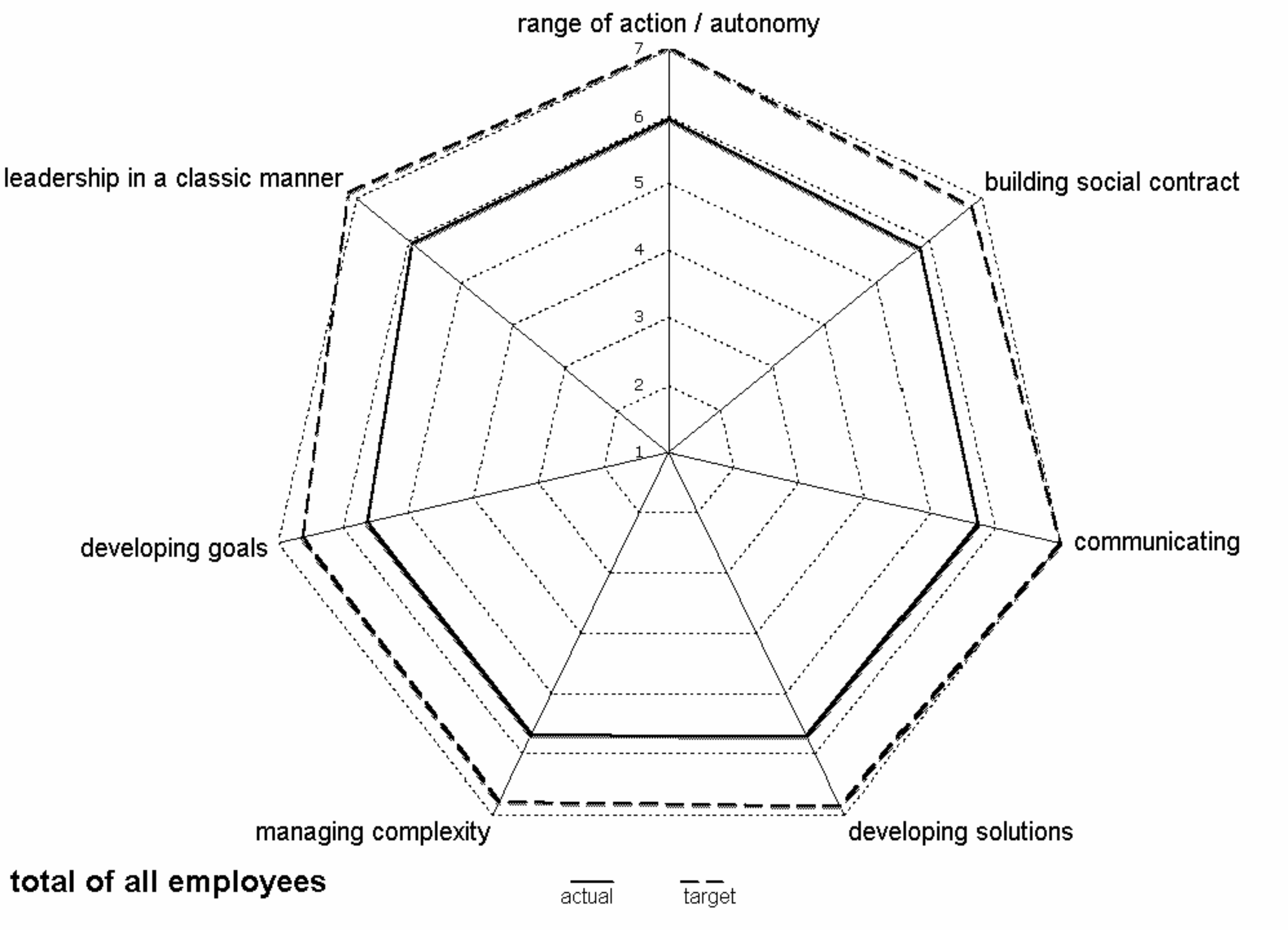
- Techniques of solution-focused discourse,
- Empowering the employees by assigning them responsibility and facilitating their autonomy,
- Assistance in developing goals and steps to achieve them,
- Supporting and stimulating people in accordance with their individual potential
- Support in developing and utilizing personal resources,
- Support in difficult situations by:
  - Providing security, structure and defined guidelines,
  - Providing clear instructions and rules
  - Fulfilling their role as manager and showing confidence in the actions of their employees.

The analysis of the observation results showing the high extent of solution-oriented attitude was surprising for both the division and department managers (see table in appendix 2). Out of these results they chose examples for best practice, which were presented in a later meeting by the department managers. As examples, they selected a solution-focused guideline for discussions about the client's current situation, a house meeting with clients, in which the dialogue techniques were used, as well as a goal setting conversation with staff. In the beginning division manager had the impression that the department managers didn't apply many of the solution focus principles. The interviews and the observations showed a different picture. The observations confirm the department managers' statements.

The questionnaires provided insight as to the degree to which the employees saw their managers using solution-focused elements in dealing with each other. 40 questions were the foundation for 7 criteria, 6 of which dealt with the solution focus (Respecting Autonomy, Relationship building, Communication, Developing Solutions, Dealing with Complexity, Developing Goals) and one dealt with classic leadership activities.

The overall results of all the participants (Graphic 1) show a balanced picture of all 7 criteria. The mean values vary between 5, 6 for "Developing Goals" and 6.0 for "Respecting Autonomy", and the Criteria for classical Leadership. The scale applied ranged from 1 (not true at all) to 7 (completely true). The staff generally attested their managers high levels of competence in both the solution-focused and the classical leadership areas.

The target value for each of the 7 criteria was about 1 point above the actual values. This also applies to the classical leadership criteria. The staff wished for an even stronger implementation of the principles described by all 7 criteria. They saw potential for development in all of the elements shown in Graphic 1.



Graphic 1:
the statements of all the employees regarding the behaviour of their managers (target values and actual values)

Following the feedbacks to the observations, the managers developed guidelines for solution-focused management of employees and clients, as well as for the solution-focused client's care. These were then presented in the departments. The staff welcomed and supported these guidelines - they were even integrated into the internal quality management and are regularly reviewed.

Guidelines for solution-oriented leadership of employees	Guidelines for solution-oriented client care
Solutions and goals get agreed on: – Attitude: Employees are experts and have resources – Means: e.g. support documentation – Appreciative attitude in relation to employees as human beings – Openness for dialog Different opinions generally have the same value. If possible, consent is aimed at, otherwise managers decide. Decisions are not absolute but process oriented. Tasks, competencies, and responsibilities are assigned to employees.	We work in partnership and in an appreciative manner with clients. We accompany clients to their goal so that they can find their solution by themselves. We support clients in the process of discovering their resources and skills. We meet clients where they are. We respect the client's position and moral concepts. We agree on shared goals. We examine the usefulness of the chosen path together with clients.

Conclusions

Managers who use the solution focus enable their employees to develop individual goals and strategies. They do this by providing an appropriate framework. They have taken the habitual short-meeting format that was a part of the hospital routine and adapted it to their needs. Whereas in the hospital the employees mostly listened, here it is the employees who talk about their work with the clients. The employees are the experts regarding the clients' care. The managers provide an atmosphere conducive to the assumption of responsibilities by the staff, they do this by "leading from behind". They actively listen to reports, compliment the staff, voice their appreciation and give constructive feedback. They support their staff in the tending to clients by providing support during difficult situations and giving advice when it is asked for or required.

The managers are also willing and able to reflect on their own actions. They see their own abilities for solution-focused approach in a much more critical light than their employees. They know that there are always a number of options to choose from, and that they too make mistakes in judgment or act contrary to solution focus principles. Those managers, who best understood the subtleties of solution-focused work, were also the most self-critical. On a scale of 1-10 to determine level of solution focus in their work, they all aimed for a high place on the scale. The staff also saw potential for the enhancement of the solution focus in the dealings and attitudes of their managers.

Again and again, the coexistence of classical management techniques and solution-focused thinking was noticed. The employees actually requested a higher level of the classical elements of goal setting, guidelines for structure and more accountability by the management. They even felt that in critical situations solution focus must take second place to clear, precise and sometimes authoritarian commands and leadership. This leads us to the conclusion that classical, authoritarian leadership and a more egalitarian, solution-focused approach are by all means compatible and often actually expected by the staff. This is because the solution-focused approach itself has its own limitations. The team found that in critical situations concise and unquestioned leadership is called for.

How to most effectively manage is not so much an either-or situation: either classical hierarchical management or a solution-focused approach. What seems more important is to find an appropriate balance between the two approaches, based on the respective context and situation.

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Appendix 1:

Observation manual

Observer: ....

Observed person: ....

When (from/to)? ....

What was most impressing in the leadership style, what was helpful or supporting for employees or clients? Or what is completely different from the way we do it?

The way discussions are held	Interaction with employees or clients	The way difficult situations are managed	Characteristics I'd like to mention

Keywords for an appreciative observation at work

The way discussions are held

discuss, negotiate, searching for solutions, agree with someone, help/support, inspire, active talking, observe, appreciate, give confidence, bolster, active listening, point to exceptions

To challenge someone to act independently, refer to strengths/skills

Ask questions, involve all in the conversation, give positive feedback

Express praise and recognition

Show differences, instead of insisting on "truths".

Interaction with employees or clients

Show interest in people, the ability to empathise, interact in partnership, show feelings in the current moment, give critical information in a sensitive manner, motivate

Develop possibilities for advancement adequate to the person, consider the persons way of living (culture, language), give the person self confidence

Treat employees as experts

Involve all concerned in decision making, reflect on own behaviour and decisions, trust in the person's ability, refer to existing strengths

Humanistic perspective, development of skills through self activity

The way difficult situations are managed

Focus on the essential, keep the overview, give safety, show a calm appearance, do clear planning

Support the development of goals or small steps, make sure that goals can be achieved, orient at possible solutions, envisage the future

Show engagement, take responsibility, include other peoples' ideas and viewpoints, show differences, admit mistakes to oneself and others

Openly addresses difficult questions, trust in the ability of the recepient to deal with it

Hand over personal responsibility , trust in the competence and ability to solve problems

Appendix 2: Overview of the observation results

<table>
<tr><th>Observation dimension</th><th>Employees</th><th>Clients</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">The way discussions
are held</td><td colspan="2">Giving respect and appreciation
Taking concerns and messages seriously
Asking questions, showing interest
Active inclusion
Letting them formulate goals</td></tr>
<tr><td>Collegial
Professional sharing
Esteeming different Concepts</td><td>Step by step
Calmness and serenity
Active listening
“able to connect”
Beeing responsive to needs
Using scaling questions</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Interaction with employees
or clients</td><td colspan="2">Motivation through praise and recognition
Develop the path to the solution by themselves
Responsible for the transfer of the goals
Inclusion in the decision making</td></tr>
<tr><td>Experts for the task
Independent, autonomous
Moderation of the meeting
Scheduling</td><td>In partnership
Sustainable
Resource oriented
Encouraging and supporting
Recognize development steps
Skills</td></tr>
<tr><td>The way difficult situations
are managed</td><td>Receive orientation and structure
Accompany in a supportive way
Take responsibility</td><td>Safety, structure and clear
instructions,
Follow rules
Show trust</td></tr>
</table>

Kees Blase & Mark McKergow

Meanings affect the heart – SF questions and heart coherence

Keywords: Emotions, heart coherence, questions, physiological response, solutions focus

Summary

In Solution-Focused work we do not talk about emotions, but we are bringing clients in a process directly affecting emotion. Clients often experience the process of moving from a state of some frustration to appreciation. In this paper we discuss the view of emotions as personal experiences for the client, which may be correlated with Heart Rate Variability (HRV). HRV is easily measurable using sensors and computer software. During the conference session related to this paper we will be conducting an experiment to measure HRV during a solutions focused coaching interview, to investigate the nature of any correlation between 'solution talk' and HRV. We hypothesise that solution talk may enhance HRV, as compared with problem talk. The results from a live experiment at SOL 2006 are presented, which show significant increases in heart coherence during an SF coaching session.

Introduction

In Solution-Focused work we do not talk about emotions, but we are clearly engaging clients in a process directly affecting emotion. Clients often experience the process of moving from a state of some frustration to appreciation.

The HeartMath Institute has fifteen years experience with measuring and practising how the heart reacts in processes of frustration and appreciation. HeartMath has created a biofeedback system to measure heart coherence by making visible the rate of change of heart rate. In this article we will bridge the experiental knowledge of solutions focus with neurocardiological science to attempt to discover what happens on the physiological body level when we experience 'solution talk'.

"Emotion"

Recent research in neuroscience has resulted in a what is claimed as a more precise definition of "emotion", as distinct from "feeling". Neuroscientists Hanna and Antonio Damasio have written that "Emotions play out in the theatre of the body". By contrast, "Feelings play out in the theatre of the mind" (Damasio, 2003). First emotions are coming up, and than they can effect feelings. Emotions are visible and measurable, and feelings are hidden, like mental images necessary are, unseen to anyone other than their rightful owner, the most private property of the organism in whose brain they occur. Emotions can be visible in facial expressions, in body language, and can be heard in the voice.

We can also make emotions visible with current scientific probes such as hormonal assays , electrophysiological wave patterns and heart rate variability. Feelings stay hidden, and can only be known by questioning the persons feelings. They are therefore of little conversational use, being an example of 'what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence' (Wittgenstein, 1961: 74).

Heart Rate Variability

In this article we will focus on the heart and measuring Heart Rate Variability (HRV) to get another view of emotion. We usually think of the heart rate as varying over periods of minutes – for example a resting pulse may be 70 beats per minute (bpm), increasing to 150 bpm after exercise. Closer examination, however, reveals that heart rare is not as regular as is often thought. The apparently steady 70 bpm is in fact irregular, with a different period between each individual beat. The heart accelerates and delays constantly. (See Figure 1)

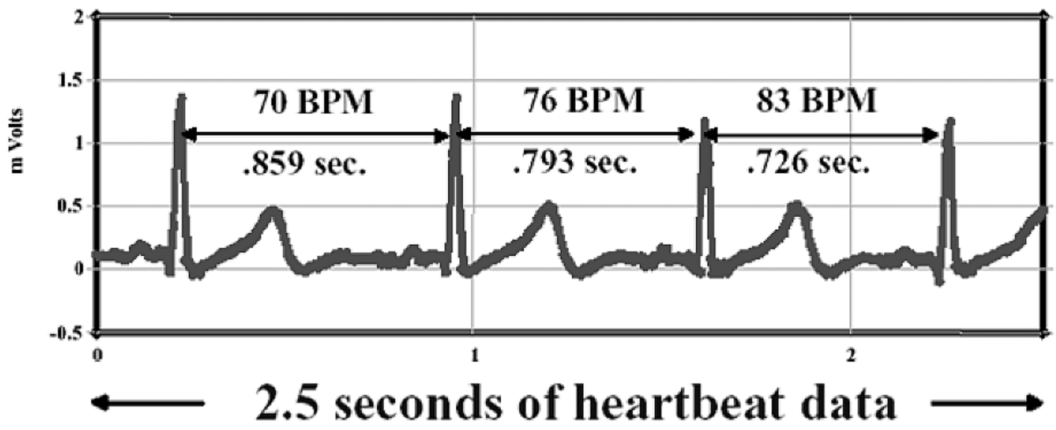

Figure 1 Heart Rate Variability

The HRV can be considered as the "language" of the heart, that can be heard each moment all over the body. HRV can be seen as an integral communication way of the body.

HRV and emotion

Different emotions show different patterns of the heart rhythm. In the pictures below (Figures 2 and 3) you can see the heart rhythms connected to the emotions labelled anger and appreciation. You can see that in the case of appreciation, the HRV is changing more smoothly - it accelerates and decelerates regularly. This is called heart coherence.

In anger the variability is more irregular. In frustration the pattern is even more disordered. The sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomous nervous system are out of sync with each other, battling for control over the heart rate-the sympathetic trying to speed it up and the parasympathetic trying to slow it down.

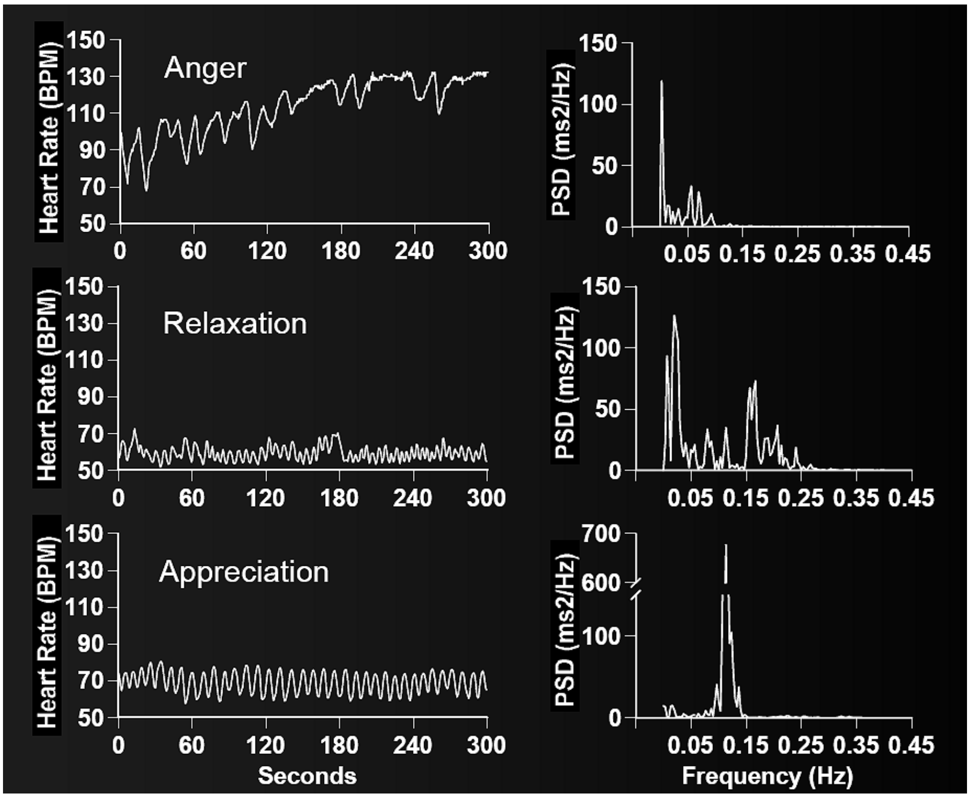

Figure 2 Emotions and heart rhythms

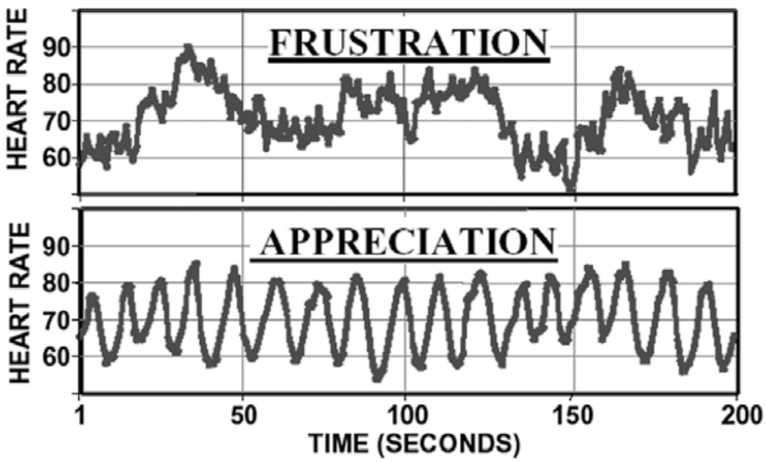

Figure 3 Heart Rhythms reflect how in sync we are

Figure 2 shows an interesting, and for many people unexpected, phenomenon. Relaxation does not appear to effect heart coherence. During relaxation the heart rate is very disorderly. So this is not a simple matter of calmness equals heart coherence. The heart can be in a coherent or an incoherent state in either relaxation or arousal.

So what is the significance of heart coherence? Is it beneficial? The answer seems to be Yes!

The Heart/Brain System

Recent research results at the Institute of HeartMath (IHM) (McCraty, Atkinson and Tomasino, 2001) have shown that heart rate coordination influences the coordination of the brain's electrical activity. Furthermore, IHM studies (published in the American Journal of Cardiology, Stress Medicine and other peer reviewed journals and collected by the above authors) have shown that positive emotional states (such as love, care or appreciation) all create harmonious, coherent electrical patterns in the heart's beat-to-beat rhythms, while negative emotional states (such as stress, anger, frustration, or anxiety) all create jagged, incoherent electrical patterns in the heart's rhythms.

This correlation can be measured through HRV analysis. HRV is considered by cardiologists to be a measure of autonomic nervous system balance and function. Stressful, incoherent patterns in the HRV are communicated from the heart to the brain. Conversely, harmonious, coherent HRV patterns, generated by positive emotional states, entrain the brainwaves into harmonious patterns. In addition, positive emotional states and the coherent heart rhythms they generate have been shown to increase health and have positive effects on the nervous, immune and hormonal systems.

Arousal vs relaxation

When we look on the body level of hormones we see the hormone adrenaline levels rise when there is high arousal, and decrease during relaxation.

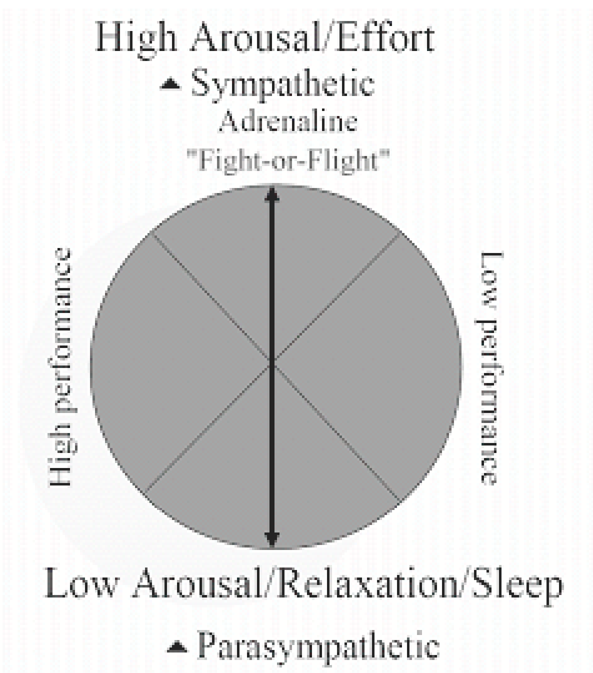

Figure 4 Arousal vs relaxation - adrenaline

With heart coherence, we look at a different group of hormones; cortisol (the stress hormone) and DHEA(DeHydroEpiAndrosteron) known as the anti-aging homone. During heart coherence DHEA increases and cortisol decreases.

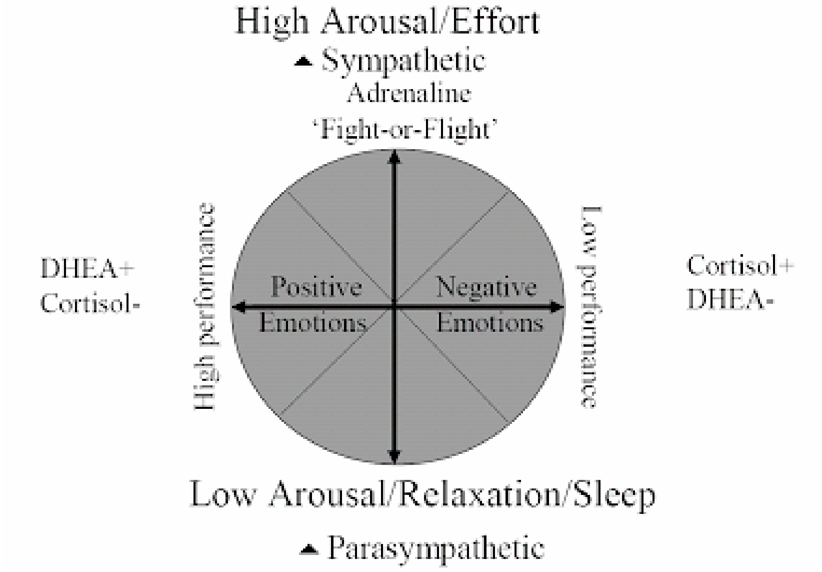

Figure 5 Heart coherence – Cortisol and DHEA

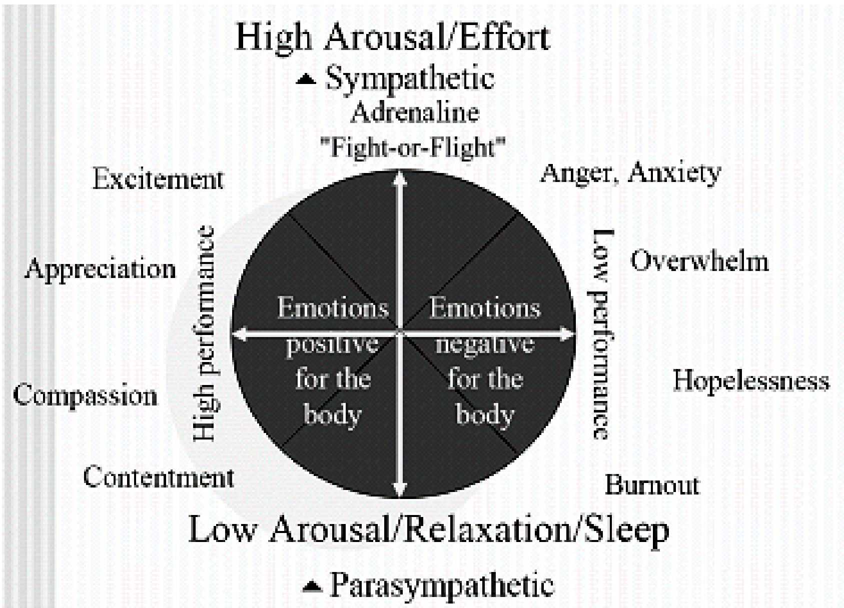

Figure 6 Heart coherence and positive emotions

As can be seen from the tables below (data extracted from McRaty, 1998), a low ratio of DHEA to cortisol is correlated with many indicators of ill health and disease.

High Cortisal: DHEA

- Accelerated aging and impaired skin elasticity
- Impaired memory and learning – destroys brain cells
- Thins bones (osteoporosis) and reduced muscle
- Impaired immune function and more infections
- Impaired metabolism – fat on waist and hips
- Impaired liver function – increased cholesterol
- Impaired pancreas – increased blood sugar

A high level of cortisol: DHEA is also linked to obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's and HIV related disease (many supplementary references can be found in McRaty, 1998).

The HeartMath method

The HeartMath method is a way for an individual to train and use biofeedback to achieve heart coherence. This heart coherence has important effects in management: effects have been shown in stress-management, clear thinking, decision-taking, peak-performance and creating an appreciative climate in companies around the world. (There are many references and cases in Childre and Martin, 1999)

Using the biofeedback of HeartRate Variability has advantages, because it is:

-simple

-sensitive

-easy to measure

-measures in the moment, reflects the effect of good and bad questions

Research showed:

-better performance in sport, school and work

-better balance emotions and mind

-lowering blood pressure

-changing the hormone ratio Cortisol/DHEA in a very positive way

-benefits with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, hypertension, etc

The method uses a biofeedback system to measure heart coherence. You can find out more about it at www.heartmath.com.

Heart Coherence and Solutions Talk

During the conference we carried out a live experiment to assess any correlations between heart coherence and solution talk. Mark interviewed a volunteer, who was wired up to an HRV measuring device running on a laptop PC. Kees supervised the measurements and helped us to interpret the data.

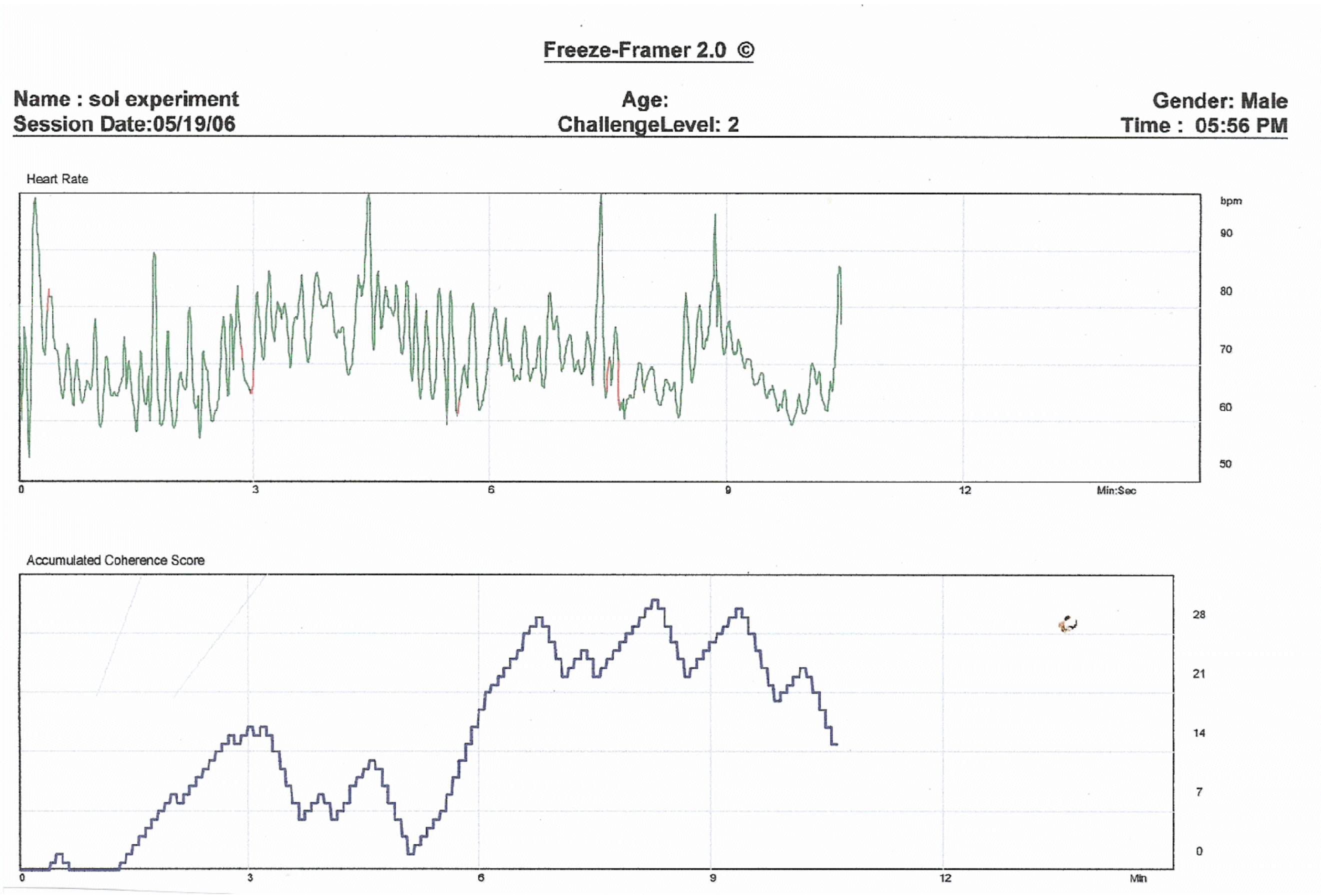

Figure 7 – Experimental results for heart rate (above) and HRV coherence (below)

The figure above shows results obtained during the experiment. The top graph shows the client's heart rate(varying around 70 bpm during the interview). The bottom graph shows the coherence of the heart rate variability.

At the start of the interview Mark asked the client about what he would like to improve in his life (work life balance). Mark helped him to build a Platform about the kinds of things he might be wanting in a more balanced life. There were problems with the heart rate sensor at this time, so coherence was not measured during this part of the interview.

Once the sensor was sorted out and measuring commenced, Mark summarised the platform and reminded the client about the things that would make for a more balanced life. This happens between 1.00 and 3.10 on the graph. During that period we see a coherent pattern of the heart rate variability appearing – similar to coherent wave pattern shown in Figure 3 . In the accumulated coherence score, the line goes up in the period 1.20 to 3.00. We do not see this coherent pattern while the client was speaking, but when he listens to his own ideal moments heart coherence appears: it seems that heart coherence appears more easily while listening then while speaking. This is one good reason why it is so important that we repeat the clients' own words, so they can feel them and reflect on them.

At 3.10 Mark started the miracle question. At the beginning of the miracle question, the client is thinking, maybe his mind jumps between different situations or possibilities. The classic miracle question involves waking up tomorrow and finding that a miracle has happened. This client says "This is difficult. Tomorrow is Sunday, I am still at the conference, so how can I imagine myself in a perfect future situation?" Mark's reaction was simple: tell me about your perfect Monday. The next moment the client described a quiet breakfast on Monday with muesli and a big smile appears on his face. On the screen we see that the HeartRate Variability becomes coherent again: the coherence line rises in the period between 5.00 minutes to 7.00 minutes. During this time Mark only asked: "What else?".

The question "what else?" and being silent for a moment are very effective tools, in which coherence can appear. We did a similar experiment in Amsterdam earlier in 2006, where we also found that silence is very important. When you ask a question, it is incredibly important to leave the other person with the question, to give time and space. The body reaction is clear: the more you create silent moments after questions…. the more coherence….the more the process deepens. A solution focussed interviewer can see it as a compliment when someone in the audience thinks that the process is slow, and yet we can see the significance of the pauses and silences.   Slow down to make the process quicker.

At the end Mark formulated compliments and affirms. It has been known for more than ten years that appreciation creates coherence in the Heart Rate Variability, and so it is no surprise that the line goes up from 8.50 till 10.00, the end of the short interview. The heart is really touched by the solution focussed approach.

Conclusions

During the experiment we showed, in one case at least, that a Solution-Focused interview definitely affects the client on the body level (which might also be called the emotional level) even though emotions were not discussed. The client's building of an answer to the miracle question (the construction of a Future Perfect, in Mark's terms) increased coherence, as did the affirms at the end of the interview. The silences, pauses for thought and gentle 'what else' questioning all helped the process.

There may be more to learn from further work using HRV measurements. These might include:

- what are effective questions and what less effective ones?
- how much silence do you need to proceed effectively? What is the most effective timing?
- what is the effect on coherence when you talk a lot as an interviewer? What words help and what words are less effective?
- what is the effect on coherence when you summarize ideal moments and when you are appreciative?

We should take care to remember that 'every case is different' and to beware over-generalising. However, the present experiment has shown conclusively that any accusations of SF ignoring the emotions are very wide of the mark.

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Solution-Focused Leadership

Madeleine Duclos

Solution-Focused Leadership through Appreciation

Keywords: Appreciation, recognition, acknowledgement, compliment, motivation, solution-focus, potential, resources, leadership, emotions, heartmath, team, evolution, need, management, conflicts, resonant, Pygmalion, personal style

Introduction

Appreciation is an important part of SF-Leadership. It is the basis that permits us to go where we want to go to – or to lead others where they want to go to.

How can we create a positive, creative and safe environment, where people feel appreciated and valuable, have fun and therefore are more effective and motivated learners and workers? How can we appreciate and develop existing resources, and help others realize them?

Inquiries about motivation factors show it again and again: Appreciation, recognition, acknowledgement ranks first.

Daniel Goleman says: "The fundamental task of leaders is to prime good feeling in those they lead…. That occurs when a leader creates resonance – a positivity that frees the best in people." (Goleman, 2002, p. IX)

What can be more positive than to get an appreciation of what you did - of who you are?

Mark Twain said: "I can live for two months on a good compliment."

We know that people's capacities are context-dependent – everybody has more or less access to their own capacities and resources depending on their environment, on with whom they work.

Let's take for example the capacity to speak a foreign language. Have you ever noticed that you speak more or less fluently depending on with whom you speak?

And since every capacity reacts in a systemic way, the main task of leaders is to create a positive, creative and appreciative atmosphere, where people feel safe and valuable. This allows them to develop and use their potential and to become more effective learners and workers.

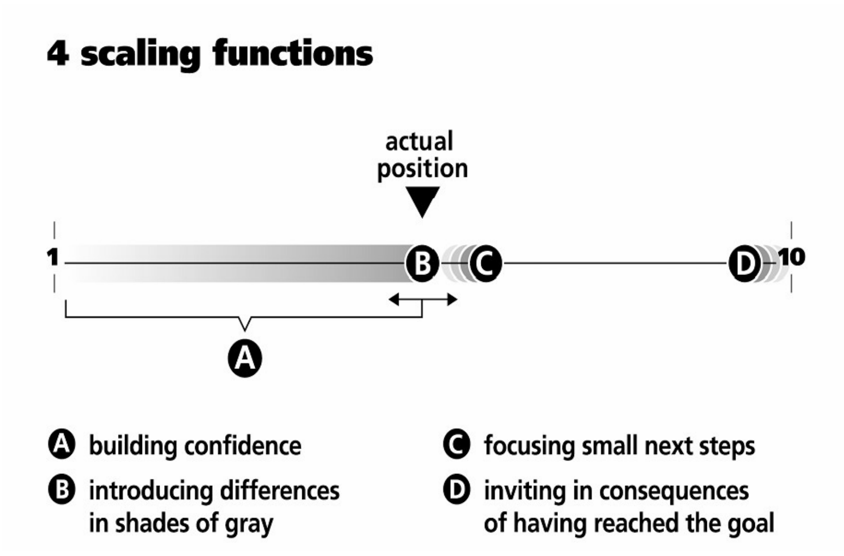
The more we focus on mistakes and errors, the more they are present and imprinted in our minds – and therefore likely to be realized. I remember, when I learned to drive a car, my teacher told me every five minutes not to hold my hands "like a squirrel" – and of course I did it – unconsciously - again after five minutes … till I got a different teacher. He appreciated my way of parking, changing gears smoothly, respecting priorities … I didn't even know I did some things well! I began to feel much more confident and at ease…. And I will never forget the moment, when he said: "Congratulations, now you hold the wheel in the good position!" – I hadn't even noticed it!

So how can a leader better help his co-worker to perceive their own resources, to empower them and to help them believe in a future success – in other words, how can a leader better motivate his people than by appreciating what is already there?

The SF-Approach

The SF-approach gives us a wonderful and effective tool to appreciate and develop existing resources in others - and first, to help them to realize their own ressources.

For example, let's look at the scale-questions. Peter Szabo shows it clearly in the following picture: The whole A-part is about appreciating past and present actions and attitudes - and what is sometimes even more: making them realize by the other person and therefore give him confidence. How often the other person is not even aware of his success? Or he doesn't dare to admit it unmotivated, because it would be a proof of arrogance – we have all learned the importance of being modest.



picture by Peter Szabo (http://www.solutionsurfers.com)

An appreciative Solution-Focused talk can start by simply asking a question like:

- *On a scale from 0 to 10, how effective have you been in this project?*

- *Seven.*

- *Good, can you tell me what makes it seven? What are the main successes that made you climb on seven?*

You see, in no time at all, your co-worker evaluates himself his work and appreciates in what he succeeded. This is the first learning step in becoming capable to appreciate others. If you can not appreciate yourself, you can not appreciate others.

I have never met a person who evaluated himself at zero − and as soon as the answer is higher than zero, there is something to be appreciated. You just have to perceive and realize it.

The better the relations are in your team, the better the atmosphere is, the better people feel, the better people work. So one of your next questions can be about empathy - shifting perspectives:

- And where do you think your colleague would see you?

- Five.

- And what is it that your colleague would give you five?

- He doesn't know that I also did……..

Of course you don't hesitate to appreciate your co-worker yourself. Either by using the scale:

- I would rate your effectiveness at eight. And what makes it eight is ……. and...... and......

Or appreciate him in any other way. Just develop the habit of appreciating, of saying whatever positive action or attitude you perceive.

Besides the fact that your co-worker gets markers − i.e. he knows what he does well in your eyes − he also develops his self-esteem and his self-evaluation.

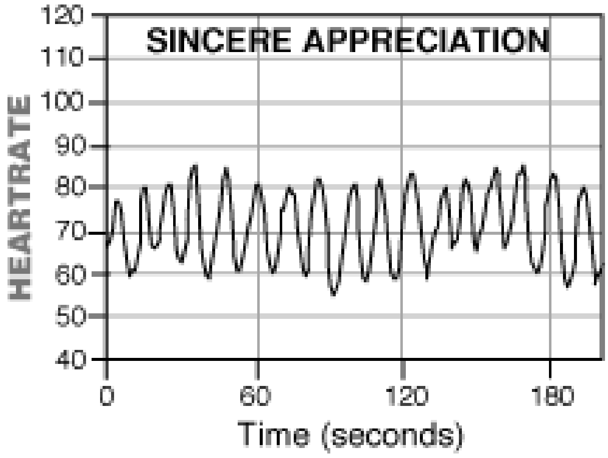
He feels appreciated and proud − and only in this positive emotional state can he perform at his best and develop his potential.

Indeed, positive emotions appear to have this complementary effect. They broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind.

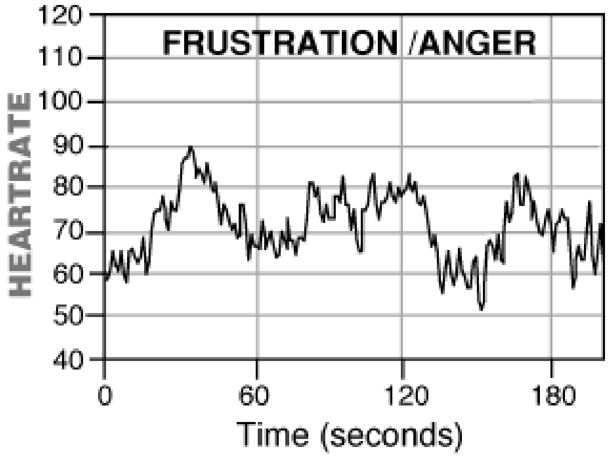
Pride, for example, follows personal achievements. It broadens by creating the urge to share news with others and to envision even greater achievements in the future.

In contrast to "negative" emotions, which carry other adaptative benefits in other situations, the broadened thought-action repertoires triggered by positive emotions build enduring personal resources (Frederickson, 2001, p. 218-226).

Appreciation also has a positive effect on our body − on the variability of the heart rate (HRV) - which reflects our emotional state. The following pictures illustrate this very well: During appreciation you see coherence, i.e. increased heart-brain synchronization. In this state the maximum of the brain is used and therefore we perform at our best:



In a state of frustration or anger, the HRV looks something like this:



You will find more information on this at: http://www.heartintelligence.com (Kees Blase)

Let's come back to our SF-talk. You may end it with a Future-Pace-question like:

- *And what will take you one more point up in a future project?*

This is not only Future Pace, but also a much more efficient way of helping the other to perform better, without focusing on his mistakes and trying to avoid them, but by focusing on the solution and making it happen:

- *How can you make it even more efficient?*

- *How can you improve it?*

- *What could you do instead?*

- *How can you change this?*

and so on.

This means that not you, but your teammate will find himself new challenges. He will be much more motivated to achieve them, because he is in a responsible attitude, he has defined them himself – it is not one of your orders – you trust him, you believe in his capabilities, you give him space to grow.

To give and to receive appreciation

In everyday life, what is it that hinders us sometimes in telling others how important and valuable their work is for us, how important and valuable they are for us?

How often do we not dare to give a positive feedback, because we are afraid that they would become insolent?

Because we are afraid they could become better than we are?

Because we are embarrassed and do not know how to say it?

Because we do not get appreciation neither?

Because we are afraid that they would ask for more money?

AND because good work is simply normal! That is what they are paid for – so why mention it?

Every human being needs five (5!) words of recognition, acknowledgement, appreciation to balance one (1!) word of criticism (Furman/Ahola, 2004, p. 25).

Appreciation is the fuel that drives people, THE factor that motivates them to go further, to excel in what they do.

Appreciation means telling the other how important he is and how much his/her work is appreciated.

It implies empathy, acceptance and congruence. Empathy means non-judging sympathetic understanding, acceptance implies unconditional appreciation and emotional warmth - and congruence is authenticity, integrity.

So when you "give" appreciation, be authentic, describe what you see/hear - a concrete behavior - and express how this makes you feel.

And when you "receive" appreciation, formulate acceptance – for example: "Thank you." Express your emotion – for example: "I'm happy you like it." and expose yourself – for example: "I like it too." (Yoram Galli, SOL-Conference 2005)

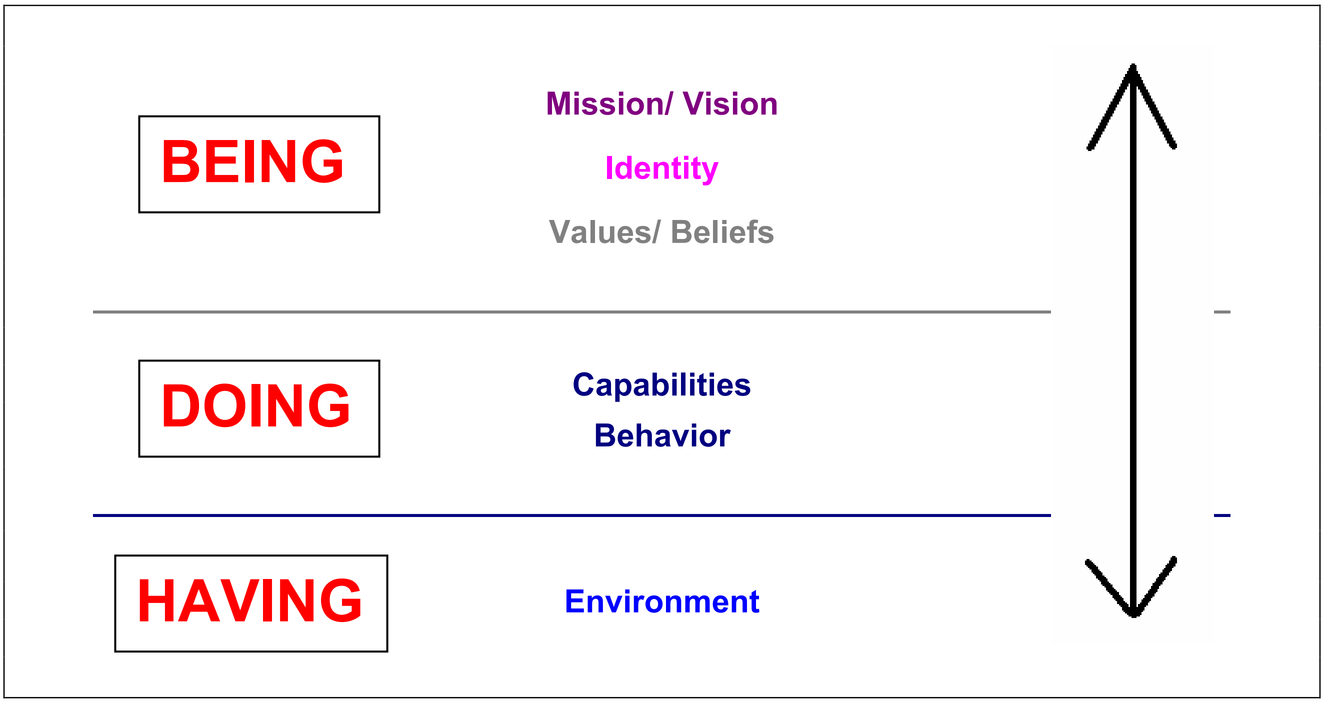
Make sure not only to receive, but to also contain the appreciation you get. Never "discount": "Oh, it is not worth mentioning it – the others did much more than I did."

Especially women have a tendency not to allow themselves to accept and contain appreciation (Mohl, 1994, p. 13-19).

Another bad habit is to try to give an appreciation immediately back, e.g. "Oh you did a good job, too!" Let the appreciation reach you – dare to enjoy it!

Appreciation has to be both, genuine and appropriate. Studies of human nonverbal behavior document that smiles that are ingenuine or otherwise disconnected from current circumstances loose credibility as expressions of internal states (Frank, Ekman & Friesen, 1993). Ingenuine or inappropriate appreciation – i.e. too much or nor not really honest – are not only not helpful, but counterproductive.

Appreciation embraces the whole human being: who you are (being), what you do (doing) and what you have (having). Appreciation is on all logical levels (Robert Dilts), Feedback is on the level of behavior / capabilities (doing):



Different forms of appreciation

Of course, there are not only words for appreciating others. Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan and Glenn Parker give twenty examples, and invite you to choose for yourself (Thiagarajan/Parker, 1999, page 43):

"Please review the following list of forms of recognition. Check the forms that you would value and like to receive. You may check as many as you like, but check only the ones that appeal to you.

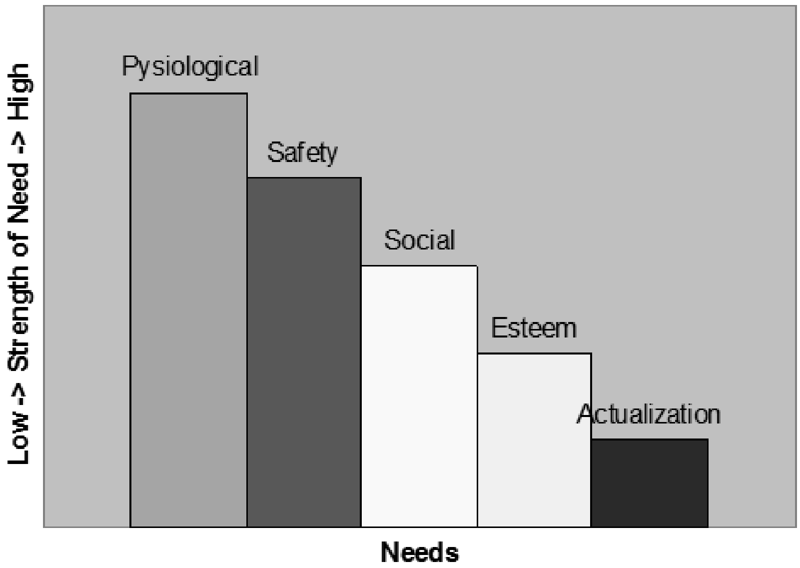
1. *Receive positive verbal feedback at a staff meeting.*
2. *Be asked to take on a tough problem or new challenge.*
3. *Be asked to give a presentation on your work at a staff meeting or a company conference.*
4. *Receive positive, handwritten comments in the margin of a document you prepared.*
5. *Be invited to a barbecue or dinner party at the home of your boss.*
6. *Be given the opportunity to work flexible hours or work at home.*
7. *Go to a golf and tennis weekend at a beautiful resort with other award winners from the organization.*
8. *Be given the opportunity to purchase new tools and equipment to enhance your work.*
9. *Have your picture and a story about your work appear in the company or community newspaper.*
10. *Be asked for your opinion on a difficult organizational problem or a new business opportunity.*
11. *Be given the opportunity to speak about your work at an important professional conference.*
12. *Be offered the opportunity to learn a new system, operate some new equipment, or in other ways increase your skills and knowledge.*
13. *In a prominent location, have your picture displayed along with either letters of commendation or a description of your work or both.*
14. *Be asked to help a colleague get started with a project or solve a particularly difficult problem.*
15. *Receive verbal recognition for your work from a senior-level executive at a company forum attended by you and your colleagues.*
16. *A solution that you recommended is being implemented throughout the organization.*
17. *A customer or other stakeholder sends a letter to your boss praising your work.*
18. *When you ask for help, your boss offers to pick up some of the load directly, share his or her expertise, or obtain outside assistance.*
19. *Receive a T-shirt, hat, or mug with your name or other indication on it that makes it clear that it is recognition for your work.*
20. *Be empowered to make decisions or act in other ways that increase control over your work."*

As you may have noticed, all the impair numbers are extrinsic, and the pair numbers are intrinsic motivators. Extrinsic motivators are forms of appreciation that come from outside the person and appeal to the outer-directed self. Intrinsic motivators appeal to the inner self because they focus on things that may be apparent only to that person. Both motivators have their place, and one is not better than the other.

Let your team members mark the appreciations they like. Use this information not only for yourself, but share it with the whole team, so that everyone starts to detect what form of appreciation motivates whom and how they also can appreciate, i.e. motivate each other.

Appreciation in human evolution

Appreciation is a basic need. If you don't have enough of something - i.e. you have a deficit - you feel a need. Abraham H. Maslow saw all these needs as essentially survival needs. Even love and esteem are needed for the maintenance of health. According to him, there seems to be a hierarchy into which human needs are arranged, as illustrated in Figure 1:



source: http://www.accel-team.com

The physiological needs at the top of the hierarchy tend to have the highest strength until they are somewhat satisfied. These are the basic human needs to sustain life itself - food, clothing, shelter. Until these basic needs are somewhat satisfied, the majority of a person's activity will probably be at this level, and the others will provide little motivation.

When these basic needs begin to be fulfilled, other levels of needs become important, and these motivate and dominate then the behavior of the individual. And when these needs are somewhat satiated, other needs emerge, and so on down the hierarchy.

In the past, management systems of rewards (appreciation) have attempted to satisfy an individual's lower level needs for safety and physiological security, for protection against deprivation and threat to a worker or his family, e.g. food presents, long term contracts, good insurances (ex. life insurance) and so on.

However, management systems are now – or should be – endeavoring to satisfy the individual's higher level needs for esteem and self-actualization.

Appreciation builds the bridge from the "social"-level to the "esteem"-level: After individuals begin to satisfy their need to belong (social connection), they generally want to be more than just a member of their group. They then feel the need for esteem - both self-esteem and recognition from others. Satisfaction of these esteem-needs produces feelings of self-confidence and pride. People begin to feel that they are useful and have some effect on their environment.

Sometimes people are unable to satisfy their need for esteem through constructive behavior. When this need is dominant, an individual may resort to disruptive or immature behavior; a child may throw a temper tantrum, employees may engage in work restriction or arguments with their co-workers or boss.

Also, employees who don't feel appreciated, make less effort. In their eyes the "psychological contact" has not been respected by their boss/company. They have the feeling that they give more than they receive. So they only do the minimum work to rule, they just wait for the end of work and are only interested in their salary. They become distant to their work and their colleagues. They don't bring in any personal engagement anymore – neither new ideas nor criticism. In short, they have handed in their "inner notice".(Brinkmann/Stapf, 2005)

Thus, appreciation is not always obtained through mature or adaptive behavior. Sometimes people try to obtain it by disruptive and irresponsible actions.

In fact, some of the social problems we have today may have their roots in the frustration of esteem-needs. Once esteem needs begin to be adequately satisfied, the self-actualization needs become stronger. Self-actualization is the need to maximize one's potential.

In order to do so, you have to "know" your potential – to perceive your resources, and to appreciate them - to use them, and to appreciate them - to develop them, and to appreciate them.

As long as you can not appreciate yourself, you can not give valuable appreciation – and you can not receive (and contain) the appreciation you get from others. So the first step is to start to perceive your own positive sides and to appreciate them – then to perceive the good sides in your co-workers – and to tell them!

"Walk your talk" is the strongest message you can give. Your beliefs and attitude (verbal and nonverbal) are stronger than any method or skill we apply (Hawthorne or Pygmalion effect). You cannot lead others to where we are afraid to go ourselves.

If you start to experience and understand the effect of appreciation in any human relationship – and within yourself – your relationships deepen and become more satisfying, your self-esteem strengthens and your team-members feel more valuable and more motivated – you are on the way to become a "resonant" leader – i.e. a leader connecting on an emotional level.

People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.

Just take a few minutes to reflect about the following questions

What rituals do you have to appreciate yourself?

How do you commonly appreciate others?

What appreciative words or sentences do you use a lot?
- In order to appreciate yourself?
- In order to appreciate others?

How do you express nonverbal appreciation?

How could you develop and improve your personal way of appreciating others?

What elements of appreciation will you start to integrate in your personal form of leadership within the next week?

How exactly will you proceed?
How will you know that your leadership has become more appreciative?

☺ Enjoy ☺

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Bert Garssen

"Dancing with your boss" – A Solution-Focused Management Development Program

Keywords: Management development program, leadership, case

Summary

"Dancing with your boss" was developed as a Management Development (MD) program for about 120 managers from the community of Apeldoorn (157,000 inhabitants). I'll first explain the title of this article. After that I'll prescribe the procedure to get this nice job. Next I'll show an overall view of the program I did with all those managers. Finally, I will give some insight into the evaluation scores and the follow-up actions after the first training program.

The title

Thanks to Louis Cauffman (Cauffman 2001) who developed his 8-steps shuffle on his flow-chart and after working on my project for some months I hit upon the idea to call the project "Dancing with your boss". This title was chosen by a group of employees preparing a workshop for a about 100 people, not being managers. I was invited to do the kick-off. For that event I chose to do some exercises resulting in a little dance. At my workshop at SOL I'll give a lively (and lovely) demonstration of these exercises.

To get the job

The first contact with the community of Apeldoorn came about on account of their network!

I was recommended to them by the HRM-manager from another city. So, many thanks went to him.

After this recommendation I was invited to have a first talk with the MD-project group.

The first remark I made was to compliment them on the fact that they made a big plan out of an MD-project: "That needs a lot of courage". I also made a compliment on their long-term vision with their approach: Three steps over a period of about 2 to 3 years. I called it: First, Second and Third loop-learning.

After that I presented the following questions to my audience: "What must be the result of the intended MD-program?" and…. "What will be different (for the managers, the workers, for the inhabitants) after the MD-program has come to an end?" After this meeting I was asked (along with 7 other offices!) to make a proposal.

In my offer I suggested to work with a pilot, to collect some experience with some managers and my program, before deciding to entrust the whole program to me.

This they thought of as a good suggestion. They decided to continue the talks with 4 offices. The next invitation I received was to give a presentation (for them to be able to make a better choice).

I decided to do a workshop with elements of my training program, with visual, auditory and kinestetic elements using the 4 –Matmodel (see page 4). I prepared a presentation with an overall view of my program. Elements I used were: music, metaphor, yes-set, sharing successes, some information to read and an exercise (to build something abstract and getting a result within 20 minutes), positive evaluation talk on leadership tools, as shown during the building activity. With a presentation along these lines I presumed to be an exception to the other presenters getting them to work and reflect on their activities. Later on this seemed to be right and worth full: "Your presentation was surprising, dynamic and made us put our trust in you."

Reflection on my presentation

During my presentation there were some disturbing events, caused by the participants (less people than presumed, people not in time, leaving before the end, doing others things, a room that was too small, I had no flip-over available: all of them things which were agreed upon in advance).

I decided to make a point of this behaviour, confronting them with some goals they want to be realised in the MD-program (especially being client-oriented, question-oriented). Aware of taking a risk, I made this choice because this was very much in line with my value of being 'respectful' and I wanted to be treated likewise. I found a big discrepancy between what they wanted to be instilled on the managers and the behaviour of some people. So, I also took this as a learning point to them, showing my way of working in my training programs.

I wrote a letter to the program leader with my experiences.

The day after they received my letter, I got a phone call with the following message:

– a lot of apologies for what we did wrong in the procedure and to you
– thanks for the critical remarks
– an invitation to have a next talk for the job.

The result of that next talk was that I was invited to do a pilot with two groups of both 12 people. Those participants were given a very strong position in the decision for the rest of the training program (Their advice would be strictly followed by the MD-project group).

Reflecting on my actions so far, my success interventions were:

- using SF-questions in the first meeting and making compliments
- asking about their future revenues
- telling about some success feats with this SF-approach in another community and giving them the names of two references
- my skills as a presenter and the shape of a workshop, making them curious for the rest of the program
- being convinced of having a very good proposal
- to stand for my values of respect and integrity and the guts to confront them with their own behaviour
- using my background as a local governor

The expectations from the Management Team

As the Top Management Team had high expectations of this MD-program, there were a few major items:

- to reach for more, better and quicker results
- an overall better custom relation
- being more question oriented
- to improve leadership by coaching
- to improve operational management.

To reach these goals the project group suggested two approaches:

Module I: “Learning how to learn”, “Who am I?”, “What do I want?”

Module II: “Operational Management” & “Leadership by coaching”

The idea prepared for the training was a four day program (First Loop Learning). After that possibilities should be created for a follow-up session (Second and Third Loop Learning). They did not yet work out this idea in concrete actions. So I suggested to make a master plan for that in advance. Although they liked this idea, they would not yet make this idea very concrete for reasons of evaluation and financial circumstances.

Preparation on the training

1. Intake with all the participants by one of the two co-trainers, focussing on the following items:

- what do you expect from this training?
- what must be the personal results of the training, related to the expectations of the top Management Team.
- sharing personal development goals with their manager.

2. To read two books in advance:

- "The 7 habits of highly effective people" by S.R. Covey (1993)
- Solution-Focused Management & Coaching" by Louis Cauffman (2001)

The program

The first two-day module had a strong accent on "Who am I?", "What do I want as a leader?". A lot of reflection and actions resulting in a mission-statement for each participant. This module was inspired on the book of Steven Covey.

The second two-day module was totally focussed on "Solution Focussed coaching and managing", inspired on the book of Louis Cauffman.

In both modules I was eager to use the following elements in my concrete actions:

- using visual-, auditory-, and kinestetic elements: every participant could 'recognise' his preferred representation system.
- using trance-induction elements
- using the 4-Mat-system
- having a lot of variety in exercises

The first three mentioned before were related to and inspired on the Advancd Neuro Linguistic training program from Tad James (James 1999).

The program for the first module: "Learning how to learn"

This training was built on the book of S.R. Covey (Covey 1993) with the following habits in the picture:

1. Be pro-active
2. Begin with the end in mind
3. Begin at the beginning
4. Think Win – Win

5. Try first to understand before you will be understood
6. Work synergetic
7. Sharpen the saw

As this module was not strictly S.F. focused, I won't describe much more about the concrete program, knowing that a lot of the 'Covey-habits' are, in my opinion, very close to the Solution-Focused Approach, some even synchronic: especially the numbers 1 to 4.

Each habit came in the picture and I used a variety of input to the participants: papers, power-point, film, games, evaluation-talks and a lot off different exercises.

By doing so, different learning styles were activated, using participant's resources. At the end of this module all participants made their 'mission-statement', as a guideline to their actions coming up. All the participants made their personal development plan.

In this first module I already used a lot of SF-instruments like scaling, compliments, sharing successes, small steps, looking for resources, etc. This without mentioning it as SF-work (so, a kind of trance-induction).

The program for the second module: Solution-Focused approach of management and coaching

I built up this program as follows:

1. The short background of Solution-Focused thinking
2. The principles of Solution-Focused way of thinking
3. SF-approach in teamwork
4. A lot of S.F. exercises in SF-coaching and management
6. Applicable possibilities for SF-approach in supervision, intervision, collegial consultation and judgement.

All the exercises used in this module were linked to real life cases, brought in by the participants. There again was a lot of variety in the exercises. We worked on two different levels:

– individual development as a manager
– team development (and useful actions from the manager).

The 4-Mat-system:

25%
Self disvovery

Concrete Experience
Creative Teaching
What's going on in the world?

35%
Discussion

What if…?
Let them teach themselves & others

Why (and Why not)?
Needs reasons and relevance

The accomodator: starts with what he sees and hears, then plunge in! Seeks hidden possibilities, and needs to know what can be done with things. Learns best through trial and error. **Teaching as being dynamic.**

The diverger: studies life as it is, and reflects on it. Starts with what he thinks! Seeks meaning and needs to know that he is involved. Learns best by listening and sharing ideas with others. **Teacher as Innovator .**

Interaction
Evaluate & predict

Interaction
Motivate & witness

Active Experimentation
Just do it!

Reflective Observation
Just look at it!

How does it work?
Let them try it out—do it!

What about it?
Give them more information!

The converger: Starts with an idea and tries it out, testing to see if it works! Seeks usability and needs to know how things work. Learns best by testing theories in ways that make sense.
Teaching with common sense.

The *Assimilator*: Starts with an idea, reflects on it! Seeks facts and needs to know what is true. Learns best by thinking trough ideas.
Teacher as Analyzer.

Coaching & Facilitating
Students reacting

Training
Students listening, taking notes

18%
Coaching

Abstract Concepts
Intellectual and Organized Teaching
What's going on in school

22%
Information

Working on these levels the repeating questions were:

– what's still going well, unless there is a problem?
– what do you want to change?
    - are your goals congruent with what the organisation expects?
    - what must be the result of change?
    - what will be your first step to reach your goals?

Working on the teamlevel, I used the Twin-Star-model, developed by Ben Furman (Furman 2004).

The pilot

So we did a pilot-training with two groups of 12 managers: team leaders and divisionmanagers. All these managers participated voluntarily in this pilot.

The results were great: participants were enthusiastic, satisfaction/evaluation scores were 9,1

The recommendation to the MD-project group was: "Go on with this concept for all the other managers". The Top Management team decided to give me the chance to do so. The coming up months there was a lot of very nice work to do with about 100 managers, divided over 8 groups. All these groups got the 4 days training program mentioned before.

Evaluation scores including all the groups

For a better understanding of the scores it is good to know that after the pilot the participants were obliged to participate in both modules. Most people did not have any resistance and were motivated in advance (by the stories of their pilot-colleagues), some were in an attitude of 'play a waiting game' and a small group did not want to participate at all (but they had to).

With this background in mind the overall satisfaction/evaluation scores (120 people) were as follows on a scale from 0 to 10:

Module I: *8,0 ("Learn how to learn")*

Module II: *8,4 (S.F. Management & Coaching)*

Conclusions

Overall a high rate of satisfaction with the participants. There were some acceptances, some to the top-level and some to the down-level. A group of about 15 % (18 people) was not so very satisfied with the training. The top level scores came from about 60% of the participants (72 people). For the Top Management team this results were surprising; this had not occurred before. So they decided to want to know more about what was happening in those trainings.

After a talk with them the decision was made to have their own training. So, at the end of the first loop-learning action, I got the result of what I'd like them to be the first team to train.

Positive comments

- "A lot of variety in the program, both to the content and in the process. With good accents on reflection and action"
- "Agreeable variety in the used methods: a lot of diversity"
- "Convincing attitude from the trainers; a lot of professionalism, they knew what they were telling and learning"
- "An adequate and considered program"
- "I learned a lot and had a lot of fun"
- "The program gives a good opportunity to think about your own role as a leader; a lot of reflecting moments"
- "A lot of skills and methods are directly of use after the training"
- "The fact that there was created a possibility to go on with learning after the modules"

Negative comments

- The obliged character for some participants.
- Trouble at the fact that the Top Management Team did not train in advance
- For a part of participants in the first groups, it was not clear enough what was the reason why for this training: the intern communication had not been clear enough.
- The relationship between this trainings program and the personal development programs was not clear enough for about 40 % of the participants.
- To discover that follow-up learning had to be paid from the division budgets and no longer from an overall budget.

Advice for the future

I experienced it as a fact that people tend to go back to their comfort zone when there is no follow-up with the training. That would be a pity, related to the investment in time, energy and money, and also because of the inflating enthusiasm from the participants.

So, the project group for the MD-training had a good vision on the future by aiming a follow-up after the training modules. So, my advice was to make a plan for further implementation over the next few years, including the budget necessary for it.

Concrete:

1. First loop learning:
   The two Modules: reflection on own drivers and attitude as a manager, learning new skills in S.F. management.
2. Second loop learning: Shortly after the two modules:
   - start intervision groups
   - within 6 months to 1 year organise a 'come-back moment' for the participants (4 hours per group)
   - give the opportunity for those who want so, to get some individual coaching.
3. Third loop learning: One and two years after the first loop events:
   - create some moments of reflection for the managers and ask for learning questions related to the MD-program
   - create possibilities for others in the organisation the learn about S.F.

Spin off

A lot of participants had the wish to continue the training content and to take it to a deeper level of understanding and acting: implementation in their own behaviour and in their own teams and within the whole organisation.

The following concrete examples are indicative:

- both the pilot groups started intervision activities and asked for some support from our trainers.
- several intervision groups (from the next training groups) were started, some under guidance of Impuls, some on their own.
- four team leaders asked for a training Solution Focussed thinking for their teams.
- Two big divisions (both with a management team of about 20 persons) asked for support in integrating the S.F. way of thinking and working for all the managers of this division with the title: 'Making things possible'
- the Management Pool asked for a training of S.F. approach
- the HRM division sent all their consultants (10 people) to an open training instituted by Impuls: "Solution Focussed Management & Coaching"
- another big division asked for teambuilding for 14 teams in the S.F. way
- for free choice there was a possibility for managers, to get a follow-up day in June '06.
- Two groups of trainees asked for a follow-up training.
- the Top Management Team had a two-day training in March '06

- An S.F-workshop was organised in January '06. Participants were about 100 workers, not being managers.
- new oncoming managers will also be trained with the modules as mentioned .
- a general secretary asks for a training S.F approach for a group of 8 managers from different cities around Apeldoorn.

So, a tremendous spin off was the effect of the training. In fact these are a lot of examples of 'second loop learning'. Not yet fit in a concrete 'master plan' in advance, but created by the needs of the participants after the training sessions. Money was found!

Altogether we see that a big change-movement has started in the culture of the community of Apeldoorn: the problem appears to be no longer in the focus, but in the solutions.

Recently in a brochure by the community of Apeldoorn, following text was published:

Module: Solution Focussed Managing & Coaching.

Introduction: Within the community of Apeldoorn a change is happening in the way of management. We expect from managers that they develop themselves from 'thinking in problems' into 'thinking in solutions' This means that we do no longer focus on what does not work (and why not), but focus on 'what works'!
This Solution Focussed management & and Coaching model connects very consciously to the resources and strengths of the employee. This approach comprises a paradigm-shift in thinking and acting. For that we have the Management Development program.

Goals: To improve the skills from managers in practising the solution focussed way of thinking and acting.

For who: Teamleaders and division managers

Program: Introduction of the solution focussed management and coaching model. Intensive training in learning how to deal with this model and to use the skills and methods in accordance with the model, both in the way of operational management and in leadership by coaching.
Conditions:
- some experience as a manager
- It is recommended to take part in the training 'Learning how to learn' in advance.

Duration: 2 days on an external location

Follow-up: Related to developing points from the participants it is possible to do some follow-up. E.g. communication skills, intervision or individual coaching.

Trainers: IMPULS

And:

> *Interested in a collective program?*
>
> If you want to introduce and implement the Solution Focused Management & Coaching model in your team, division or unit, we offer you the possibility on your wishes. In that case, take contact with M…..

Evaluation

Coming to the end of this article, I have to give a lot of thanks to many employees from the community of Apeldoorn. Of course to all those participants at the training modules, but also all those who did a lot of work around in organisation activities and in preparing the modules. A lot of work which is not also so very visible, although very important.

Without all those people, including the top-management who facilitated the project, it would not have been possible to do this very attractive job. Thank very much for a lot of cooperation.

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Peter Röhrig

Advanced training for basic leadership skills

Keywords: leadership, solution focus, management, training, coaching, human resources, feedback, responsibility, appreciation, competence, resources, training methods

Introduction

Effective communication is a crucial factor for successful leadership. Solution-Focused conversation techniques can be taught in training sessions for senior management. Especially the tools of appropriate praise and resourceful questioning can be usefully integrated in leaders' everyday conversations. Appreciation of resources in co-workers is a very powerful way to start into more effective feedback. Praise is appropriate, if it is open and honest, clear and without reservation as well as relevant to the situation. If you praise your colleagues appropriately, it is easier for you to criticise. With some practise, leaders can extend the praise through solution-focused questions. They can ask, for example, more frequently about "how did you do it?", when they show an honest interest in the answer. Both – praise and questions - can be used to be more effective in guiding colleagues. A solution-focused view relieves leaders of too much responsibility. It is not they who have to offer a solution to how their colleague will do better in the future. Instead, their colleague takes the responsibility of finding a solution himself with which both can be satisfied.

More leadership and less management

In executive qualification and training you often find a confusion between the concepts of management and leadership. Both concepts are regularly used like synonyms. It is worth while however to look at significant differences between the concepts:

- Leadership concentrates on the right things, on effectivity
- Management on the other hand concentrates on doing things right and quickly, on efficiency.

Both concepts are important in business, however management normally does not work properly without leadership. At least management runs much easier, if leadership comes to proper decisions.

The following table compares the two concepts and shows some differences in dimensions of behaviour and attitude:

Comparing Leaders and Managers	
Leaders	Managers
Administer	Implement
Originate	Cope
Develop	Maintain
Inspire trust	Control
Focus on people	Focus on projects
Think long term	Think short term
Watch the horizon	Watch bottom line
Challenge status quo	Accept status quo
Do the right thing	Do things right

part of the table adapted from Heller (1999) p. 13

Training can support these specifics of leadership and the support is most useful, if it starts by training leadership attitudes in real live situations. This helps to develop personal leadership competence, by creating the basics of leadership behaviour before strengthening them with the use of management instruments.

In the first place leadership training should focus on how leaders lead themselves, then their co-workers and finally their company or organization. A main goal is implied in the question: “how can I lead myself and others into more self-responsibility?” Additionally it is an important task for leaders to develop social responsibility - with themselves and with their co-workers. That implies mainly the following rules and goals of cooperation:

- How I empower my colleagues to apply themselves with their whole personality,
- How I welcome diversity and use it as a resource,
- How I develop clear rules and formal arrangements,
- How I structure the organization in a way that it will serve the parties involved and not vice versa,
- How I design processes effectively and not only efficiently,
- How leadership applies self evidently in the first line for myself and how I act as a model..

Social responsibility and competence is often misunderstood as a social attitude, as sympathy for the week, as ability to remember the colleague’s birthdays, as central contact point for problems of all kinds. Social competence is properly applied in leadership, if it focuses on the following dimensions:

Determination: to win others for yourself and your goals, to convince and to inspire, needs some abilities, which have to do with socializing easily. To have a sure instinct for handling very different people and use good vibrations for reaching goals together is an important success factor for leaders.

Readiness for conflicts: to keep your own position means primarily to be clear about one's points of view and values. Social competent readiness for conflicts is founded in the insight that people follow different interests. So it is only natural to go into conflicts actively in order to carry one's points and to aim at a constructive argument.

Openness: if leaders are able to realize the meaning of emotions, to talk about them in a businesslike and at the same time emotional way, to draw the right conclusions and offer solution strategies, this is regarded as influential and sensitive behaviour at the same time. A promising combination for leaders may be to stay human and at the same time goal oriented. The Solution-Focused approach to leadership makes it easy to be clear, confident and friendly at the same time.

Basic leadership skills – the Solution-Focused approach

Leadership is a social construction. It is what we do with us and with others. Living leadership emerges in the interaction and is a mutual service:

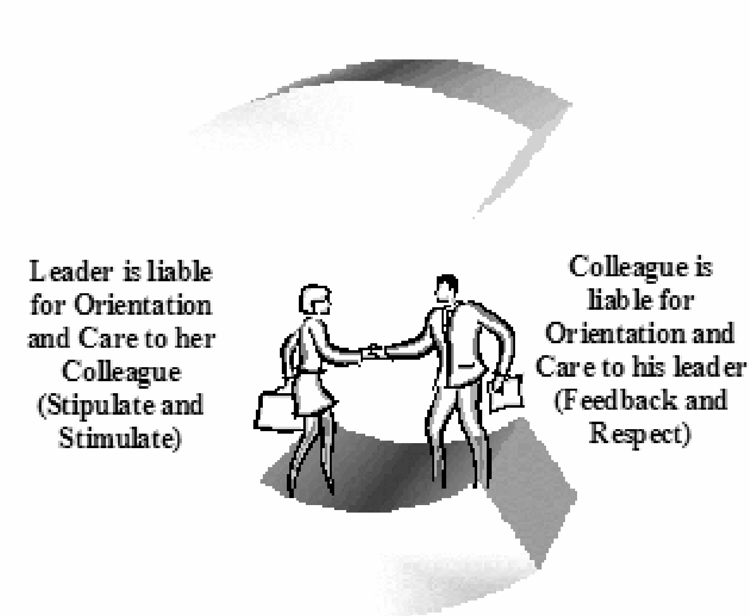

Figure 1: Leadership as mutual service

The concepts of "Stipulate and Stimulate" (in German "Fordern und Fördern") are a concise reduction of the most important tasks for leaders. They are expressions for the alignment and the care that leaders are liable for their co-workers. These - on the other hand – are liable of feedback and respect for their leaders.

Research about leadership behaviour has shown many times, that effective communication is the key factor to differentiate successful and less successful leaders. So it is quite natural to focus in leadership training on all things that work well in Solution-Focused communication.

Stimulation by acknowledgement

The most common complaint colleagues have about their bosses is "I do not receive enough acknowledgement for my work!" As leaders we tend to talk to colleagues when something is going wrong. If everything runs fine, we are content and keep our satisfaction to ourselves.

Solution-Focused leaders start to change that kind of misbehaviour. They start to pay attention to situations in their everyday work life, in which colleagues do something which is helpful to them and their business and which they have so far accepted as "normal". Whether this is the skilful handling of a difficult customer or the clear and complete decision plan prepared for them, they invest in that moment so that they can give their colleagues the acknowledgement they deserve for doing well. They can be sure that they will improve their motivation with appropriate praise.

Praise is appropriate when it is open and honest, clear and without reservation as well as relevant to the situation. With some practice leaders can extend the praise by solution-focused questions. For example, they can ask more frequently about "how did you do that?" when they have an honest interest in the answer. For instance: "You had that good suggestion about recommendations from our regular customers. How did you come up with that?"

Stimulation by asking good questions

Leaders often complain about a lack in motivation with their co-workers. They ask themselves and others what they can possibly do to increase motivation. They proceed on the assumption that there is something like “latent motivation” deep inside their co-workers which should be aroused and stimulated by appropriate means. That is why they follow the advice of experts who tell them they should use the right tools and tricks. And then they are often disappointed or baffled if that does not work.

Solution-Focused leaders know, that the most important expert for increasing motivation, effectiveness and job satisfaction is the co-worker himself. By asking the right questions assuming resources and competences they utilize the knowledge of these experts. By asking questions they get into a dialogue with their co-workers and get to know and to appreciate their opinions.

Lilo Schmitz makes obvious how useful Solution-Focused questions can be for all parties involved: “By asking questions leaders achieve new and valuable information about their co-worker’s skills and competences. They get a fresh view upon their qualities, new perceptions about what works in their company, an overview about potential development and a lot of new material for real appreciation.” (Schmitz 2000, p.30)

By stimulating co-workers by competence focused questions leaders help them to develop an eye for their personal skills and abilities and thus more job satisfaction, motivation and self-esteem, shortly: empowerment. According to the language theory of the Solution-Focused model we only know things which we have thought about yet. That is how competence focused questions work. Here is an example:

A co-worker has perhaps never thought about what helps her to keep calm in peak times.. When her leader asks her “How do you manage to keep so calm and friendly with your clients, even in this hectic time at the end of the year?” she thinks about it for the first time.. “Well, I always concentrate only on one client at a time pretending she is the only one in line.” This answer may be new to the co-worker. Now it belongs to her knowledge base that and how she keeps calm. Perhaps she will forward this tip to a younger colleague soon.

Types of questions

Leadership work with the Solution-Focused approach means basically asking well formulated questions. We ask for strengths and resources, miracles, scaling and much more. In order to integrate these questions into everyday work it may be helpful to differentiate the following types of questions:

1. Closed questions

- Are questions that evoke a yes-or-no-answer
- Can be answered quickly
- Are typical for a subject-object-relationship in the conversation (“Are you feeling fine?”)
- Leave the main time of the conversation on the side of the asking person
- Asking closed questions costs a lot of energy, The respondent is condemned to monosyllables. Leaders who often ask closed questions should not be surprised if the respondents seem to be monosyllabic and disinterested.

2. Open questions

- Are questions that evoke a longer or shorter information
- If they evoke shorter information they are also typical for a subject-object-relationship in the conversation
- Give a little bit more time to talk to the respondent
- Need a little more time to be answered
- Asking open questions also costs a lot of energy. The respondent retrieves information that is already known. This implies the danger to focus on deficits and problems.

3. Open competence and resources assuming questions

- Are questions which suggestively assume competences and resources to the respondent and evoke a longer process oriented answer. This can be amplified by persistent requesting (“What else …?”)
- Are typical for Solution-Focused conversations
- Give the main speaking time to the respondent
- Need more time and energy to be answered
- The interviewer works attentive and with low energy. The respondent works hard because he creates new resources and competence focused interpretations.

Examples

Closed question	**Open question**	**Open competence and resources assuming questions**
Can you handle this difficult situation?	How can you handle this difficult situation?	Which abilities and experiences may help you to handle this difficult situation?
Does everything work with the new program?	How do you do with the new program?	What works well with the new program?
Does anybody have a suggestion?	Which suggestions come to your mind?	How could we do that even better? What have you thought about that already?
Do you see that this was a mistake?	How could such a mistake happen?	What have we done right up to now that such a mistake never happened before?

Stipulating by feedback and sharing responsibility

In situations, in which leaders have to criticize a co-worker, a solution-focused view relieves them of too much responsibility. It is not them who have to offer a solution about how their colleague will do better in the future. Instead, their colleague takes the responsibility of finding a solution himself with which both can be satisfied. (Röhrig, 2004)

Criticising conversations are challenging for both supervisors and colleagues: "Senior management fear loss of motivation, reduced co-operation and offensive remarks. Colleagues fear being misunderstood, personally insulted or treated in an unfair way. Therefore colleagues should be encouraged to present their own point of view. Solution-focused criticising attempts to provide a balance of praise and criticism. It is not helpful to spend much time in justification or discussions about who is to blame. It is better to look at the goals and desires for the future. At the end of the conversation the colleague should have understood the following points clearly: the supervisor is dissatisfied with a concrete behaviour; in the future he wishes for a concrete positive state and he is confident that the colleague will find a solution." (Billen, Schmitz 2005, p.27)

A criticising conversation should not be a revenge, but the beginning of a positive change. It is not meant to change the colleague but to obtain better results. In order to be content with the results of the conversation, the senior manager must not accept meaningless statements such as: " I will think about it .., I will try harder....". Both sides must make concrete agreements.

Solution-Focused leadership training

The ideas above have been the basis for us (Peter Röhrig, Birgit Billen and Lilo Schmitz, professor at the university of applied sciences in Düsseldorf) to develop Solution-Focused leadership trainings. These trainings follow some simple principles:

- Our workshops are open to all executives and only to executives
- Our participants come from entirely different sectors and companies. Some are leaders for 5 people, some for 500
- We have a two days‘ basic training which every executive has to attend. In this training we introduce the theory and basic tools of the solution-focused model.
- Subsequently we have different two days‘ advanced trainings with special topics, which are organized as modules: The participants choose which of the trainings could be most helpful for their work situation and personal development goals
- The principles of our trainings correspond with Solution-Focused principles:
  - Learning by doing:
    - We make as little theory input as necessary
    - We spend much time in training Solution-Focused tools in small groups.
    - We do not use artificial situations.
    - We work on real questions of the participants‘ real work situation.
  - Every participant is an expert for leadership:
    - We appreciate and utilize the knowledge and experience of all participants.
    - So we find a variety of possible solutions without judging right or wrong.
    - So the training broadens the range of possibilities for the participants.

In this way the training amplifies above all the "space of possibilities” for participants. Since 1999 we gain experience by performing a large series of trainings successfully. These experiences slipped in other Solution-Focused leadership trainings. Currently in the modules of “Coaching for performance” a three times two day course for Swiss executives with Daniel Meier and Peter Szabó, Weiterbildungsforum Basel. (Meier, Szabó, Röhrig, 2005)

The miraculous benefit of Solution-Focused leadership training can be easily revealed by listening to the participants’ feedback at the end of the courses. Most of them are content and happy with the things they loose and with the things they gain in our trainings. Here is an example of a feedback from a participant working in the health sector:

"Some of the things I gained:

- practical tools for a communication that motivate and empower me and my co-workers
- new friends in other companies
- a lot of sincere compliments
- I feel empowered through a new knowledge about my own abilities and potentials
- I trust more in my instinct for opportunities and gain faith in my good luck
- the variety of working situations in my training group was extremely valuable.

Some of the things I lost:

- the interest in problems and causes
- the idea that a good leader has to be a super-expert
- the idea that good leadership means extremely hard work, a lot of logical planning and controlling
- the idea that good leadership means coming home late every night."

Conclusion: Advanced training methods for basic leadership skills

Advanced learning strategies share responsibilities between trainers and learners. They build on former learning experiences and focus on good practice. Approved are all forms of experiential learning, especially in interval trainings. After each learning module, in which solutions for leadership situations are developed, there is an appropriate span of time in which the new leadership knowledge and competence can be tried out practically. In the following module all the things that work already are appreciated and consolidated. For all the other things participants find new solutions.

These learning experiences can be intensified by coaching sessions between the modules. Coaching is reserved for clearing individual questions and development steps and finding small steps towards leadership excellence. If it is too difficult to organise personal coaching, we have telephone conferences in which trainers and participants work on individual and group questions in different forms of collegial consulting.

Some of our training groups became peer groups for self –organised leadership qualification. Former participants meet and work with each other regularly and invite the trainers for special occasions to get some new ideas and feedback.

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Marketing and Sales

Alan Kay

The Use of Solutions Focus in Branded Customer Experience Implementation

Keywords: solutions focus, branded client experience, front-line decision making, marketers, amplifying change processes, forceful narratives, implementing change, kitchentable roundtable, follow through

Introduction

Delivering a superior *'branded customer experience'* is a no longer optional. It is a strategic requirement of virtually all market driven organizations. Why? Because customers are becoming all-powerful. A speedier organizational response to their needs is therefore crucial, but it has become clear that reliance on the traditional top-down management approach in matrix service organizations slows down necessary change. Top-down mandates, operational planning and change management tools may help staff understand the *'what'* of desired outcomes, but the implementation – the *'how'* – can best happen through the organization's middle and front lines. It is here that a clear understanding of what the customer wants must be established. Only then can change happen immediately.

Having identified pockets of the organization where managers are keen to deliver the right customer experience, a Solutions Focus approach is highly effective in helping them build on existing – albeit unconscious – customer capabilities. By building small-step plans, establishing accountability among mid-lower level management and providing follow-through, immediate visible and sustainable change happens. Indeed, Solutions Focus can be used throughout the process – from project definition to the final outcomes review meeting.

In large consumer service organizations, it is the marketers' job to try and change customers' behaviour by making them more disposed to believe the advertising promise. All too often, marketers don't have the tools to help people in their own organizations reinforce or change their behaviour to match the promises of the brand message. The fact is, the brand has to address consumer behaviours that are constantly changing. As a result, the brand promises of many large service organizations are often ahead of their service delivery capabilities – the organization is advertising a service or attitude it cannot yet fully deliver. Meanwhile, front-line staff people see advertising that features idealized images of themselves that they would like to be able to offer, yet have neither the authority nor the support systems to make it happen. Interestingly, individual performance appraisal measures are now being set around customer experience and satisfaction. While management and staff are highly motivated to make the required changes they are uncertain how to go about it. 'What do I need to *do*?' is a question heard with increasing frequency. Defining the organization's brand promise, and helping to establish the branded customer experience is one thing; getting thousands of employees to deliver the promise is another.

Organizational responsiveness to customer needs requires new capabilities in customer listening and timely decision making, particularly at the front line. Many see the need to institutionalize branded customer experience management, but are wondering where to begin. So the question is, how does the organization shift to a customer-centric culture and embed it without a template to make it happen?

Many may think that this would require drastic action, but this article will illustrate one of the simpler ways that large service institutions can help their staff to live the branded customer experience. It will show how the use of Solutions Focus can help to create sustainable behaviour change towards customers, even when cross-functional goals are not easily aligned. Further, it will suggest that engaging functional departments to give them ownership of the approach is critical in speeding up strategic and operational decision-making, and show how collaborative cross-functional action plans can have immediate effect in modifying staff behaviour towards the customer. Finally it will illustrate how a 'follow-through' approach allows the teams to witness their own progress, thus leveraging the ripple effect of change both within and beyond the groups engaged in change.

Since solutions focus praxis involves asking a series of appropriate questions and carefully considering the clients' answers, the case methodology is partly statistical though mainly anecdotal. Conclusions have been drawn exclusively from client feedback, although the organizations cannot be named because of client confidentiality

Devolving decision making to the front line

As previously stated, there is often a gap between the definition of an organization's brand promise and establishing it in practice. In our view, there are two reasons for this: first, many matrix service organizations are struggling to find new ways of delivering customer experience promises. Second, traditional top-down management directives are not enough to change the culture and operating practices of matrix service organizations.

To expand on the first reason, today's customers are attaining a level of unprecedented power over organizations originally built around traditional production and sales models. Most products are now a commodity. The point of differentiation has become the customer experience, rather than the product itself which is largely undifferentiated. Understanding lies in the realization that the individual is engaged in the experience (Bernstein, 2006). Power has therefore shifted from the producer to the consumer, so the organization has to become both closer to the customer and even nimbler in its responsiveness. As such, the power to act on customers' requests must devolve closer to the front line.

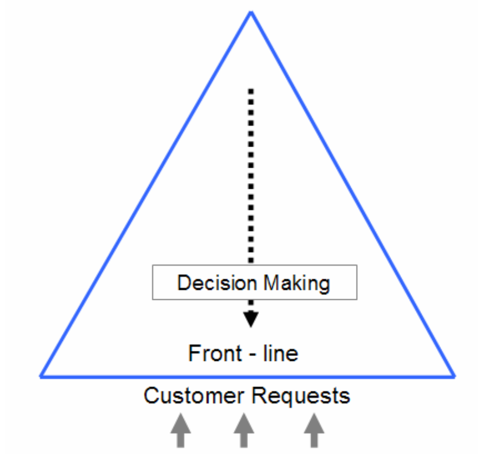

Figure 1. Decision making about customer issues has to move to the front-line:

Many customer service requests require a consistent, effective response from a cross-section of the organization, involving complex cross-functional agreements and collaborative activities. The management and departmental silo model stopped serving the customer some time ago.

Clearly, a speedier response to customer needs is crucial if an organization is to grow. But it has become clear to us that what slows down change in matrix service organizations is reliance on the traditional top-down management structure. Top-down strategy can provide only a general direction, so delivering services and products to fit the customers' needs calls out urgently for a fresh approach to internal collaboration. Possessing a wealth of knowledge about customer needs is just the start of the organization's shift to a differentiated branded customer experience capability. Creating customer-centric behaviour in a service organization can be conceptualized as four stages along a continuum:

Stage 1		*Stage 2*		*Stage 3*		*Stage 4*
Knowledge	→	**Insight**	→	**Attitude**	→	**Behaviour**

Most organizations have the capabilities to reach Stage 2, and have developed strategies to produce the desired change around Stage 3. However, for many matrix organizations, Stage 4 seems to be the most difficult stage to implement.

Creating action around Stages 3 and 4 requires collaboration between every function across the organization. This makes it very difficult for the manager to succeed in a traditional hierarchical firm that is beginning to 'de-silo' and struggling with cross-functional alignment. In an ideal future world, self-directed virtual teams may be set up to respond to customers' individual needs. Today, we know *what* we'd like to have happen. We're just not clear on *how* to make it happen.

Solutions Focus and amplifying change processes

Institutionalizing a firm's approach to the branded customer experience will not happen overnight. It takes time for an organization to develop an overall customer strategy, then to adjust its unique culture and processes around this. Top-down mandates, operational planning and change management tools can only help staff understand the *'what'* of desired outcomes. The implementation – the *'how'* – must come through an understanding of the general direction, together with an experience of what the customer wants and how to make change happen. This is especially true at the middle to lower levels of the organization. When functional groups and individuals in an organization experience how they can put the customer at the forefront of their thinking and have the power to do so, strategy comes to life. Several change management tools can be used to address the particular needs of an organization, and Solutions Focus is a useful way to leverage and amplify the effectiveness of those tools. For instance, many standard Prosci[1] and Kotter (Kotter, 1996) change management tools can be used for a variety of purposes, such as:

- Creating change champions and leadership coalitions.
- Ensuring the intended change is clearly aligned with corporate imperatives and implementation needs. Ensuring change participants clearly understand what's in it for them within the context of departmental business goals,
- Creating core project planning teams involved in the change execution to share ownership of change management plans. Identifying the need of core project teams to communicate and collaborate with relevant parts of the organization.
- Creating mechanisms to enable collaboration and two-way communication.
- Managing resistance, by thinking through the change management activities early in the change process, then providing approaches that will mitigate resistance before it happens.
- Providing the knowledge and tools to help supervisors become effective coaches for change.
- Creating systems that will track adoption of the new approach. Building in reinforcement of success as part of the change.
- Gathering continuous feedback from those who are impacted by the change.
- Encouraging celebration of successes during implementation.

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1 Prosci business process design and change management research

Solution Focus and the Roundtable

Recently, Solutions Focus has been used to amplify the Roundtable approach. When organizations' customers get together around 'the kitchen table', as it were, they are able to dramatize their stories and enter into the middle of the management planning process.[1]

It is worth noting that Roundtables can yield more than insights.

> The Roundtable is nothing more than a kitchen table conversation framed by a topic. There is a happy paradox about the seeming disorder of the kitchen table. A familiar, rambunctious part of daily life, the kitchen table is in fact a tightly structured, self-organizing forum. It has precise rules, known by all, that are easily followed.
>
> As a result, roundtable participants work together with next to no guidance to produce forceful narratives. This is important work. As Walter Fisher and other communications thinkers have shown, it is compelling stories that drive action toward the achievement of results.
>
> Compelling stories can provide emotional connection to organizational purpose, create common ground for shared discovery and joint action, make meaning visceral, spark new insights, provoke change and make information memorable.

Solutions Focus can amplify any one of these various approaches, particularly ownership of change implementation at the mid- front-line levels. Experience shows that Solutions Focus can be used successfully throughout the process: from project definition to the first core team meeting; from planning activities to follow-through discussions.

Solution Focus and Implementing Change

Once the overall customer strategy is clear, an effective way to start implementing change in an organization is by starting somewhere in the middle where front-line decision making is most influenced:

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1 PostStone Roundtable, Kitchen Table model

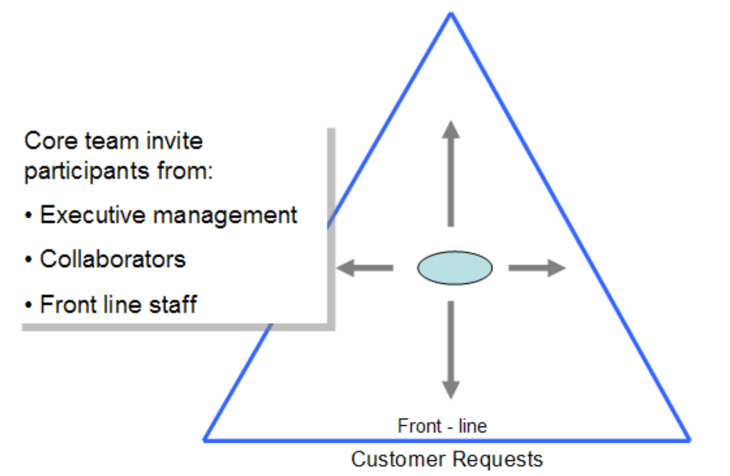

Figure 2. Start in the middle of the organization's hierarchy:

The first task is to identify those pockets of the organization where managers are already keen to deliver the right customer experience. Solutions Focus helps them build on existing capabilities that they may or may not be aware of. In this way, customer-centric thinking is brought in early to the planning / decision-making process, and accelerates the progress of change.

Project leader and core teams for each functional group should be brought in at an early stage in the process. Among other things, they should be charged with recruiting a trusted group of cross-functional managers to act as collaborators, as well as some senior executives and front-line staff who will also participate in the main change activity. 'Executive to front-line' participation helps build collaborative, cross-functional change. Recently, a client agreed to bring these parties together in a Solutions Focus Roundtable planning session with customers. Having observed the interaction, a leader volunteered the following comments:

> *'We had a lot of big decision makers at the round table. I like seeing how they work through the various issues. We had a lot of other things too, but this was one thing that I found very helpful.'*
>
> *'Remember, our mandate was not to put just our 'big guns' in there, but also to include our sceptics. I think that's the piece that's worked out really nicely.'*

Solutions Focus and business goals

A starting point of the work is the recognition that changes will accelerate when built around a team's business goals and performance targets. Asking team leaders and the core team 'what's keeping you awake at night?' helps to clarify the areas where the group are customers for change. This helps highlight and resolve a specific business issue, such as listening more actively to customers. Using the client's tools, such as brand principles, is also essential. In a recent project a team member was to make the following comment:

'I think the round tables have really brought things to life for everyone. They've given us some tangible things to work on ... specifically because they relate to customers.'

In designing the key change elements it is necessary to ensure that the activity is aligned with other similar organizational change. One participant praised the way that Solutions Focus Roundtables were used with customers in the planning sessions:

'It reinforces other cultural changes that we're doing here around the customer and the round tables. So, it's not just the icing on the cake. It really is the cake, aligning itself beautifully with what we're doing right across the country.'

Additionally, sustainability of the change outcomes must also be built into the process at this early stage, by having the core team develop sustainability ideas into their preferred future discussions.

Solutions Focus and building on existing capabilities

Under pressure to change an organization, leaders may not notice how much progress has already been achieved. Asked to describe what did not have to be changed, one solutions-focused Roundtable team leader made this comment:

'...it's about what we were already doing. It's reinforced the conviction that our people really are doing the right thing, and are going the extra mile. We hear about all the exceptions because we talk to 70,000 people a day, but we don't hear about ones that are going well.'

The solutions focus questioning tool is not only used to raise team consciousness about the issue in hand, it also generates some useful feedback for the team. For instance, questions like 'how do you see this process being useful to the customer / the team / the organization?' will elicit responses that clearly demonstrate the progress of the change process. Noting the use of the question 'where are we already living the branded customer experience?' a team member recently responded:

It fits in beautifully, because of the way that it builds on what's going well and what's working. It builds on those pieces. I loved the way we kept asking 'is there anything else?' 'What else?' [1]

There is another key element to bear in mind when working for change; that is to build accountability into mid- and front-line management change plans by creating a good number of fast-start, attainable, visible small-step change projects. The goal is to make the effectiveness and sustainability of the change visible to participants and

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1 All comments taken from roundtable discussion with Canadian Banking Client, held March 9, 2006 on follow-through review of Solutions Focus Roundtables, held June and October, 2005

colleagues. This helps create ripple effects among those inside and close to the centre of activity. The ripple effect can also be used to leverage opportunities for the participating teams, as was noted in the following observation:

> *'The other thing that it did was to help us see how our coaching's changed ... coaching team leaders is all about giving examples, making exceptions, making sure your commitment is to the customer.'*

Small-step change projects should be built around four criteria: first, they should result in outcomes the customer can see; second, the work should be completed within two weeks; third, it should require no incremental budget; and fourth, other parts of the organization don't have to change what they do. With these criteria in place, the plans become an invaluable tool. In the words of a department supervisor at a recent workshop:

> *'It helped them take accountability to the customer. Then they went out and delivered the message to all their peers.'*

Solutions Focus and follow-through

To make the work sustainable, the core teams should later review outcomes using more solutions focused questions, such as 'what's different?' 'How did you manage to do that?' Suppose you were to do more of that…?' This process not only helps the teams see that they are making substantial progress; it also encourages them to focus still more on the customer experience.

Does the whole organization need to experience this approach? It appears that this is not the case. By working with select groups of functional teams in cross-functional planning sessions, the ripple effect ensures that the influence reaches throughout the organization. The resultant culture change seems to be viral.

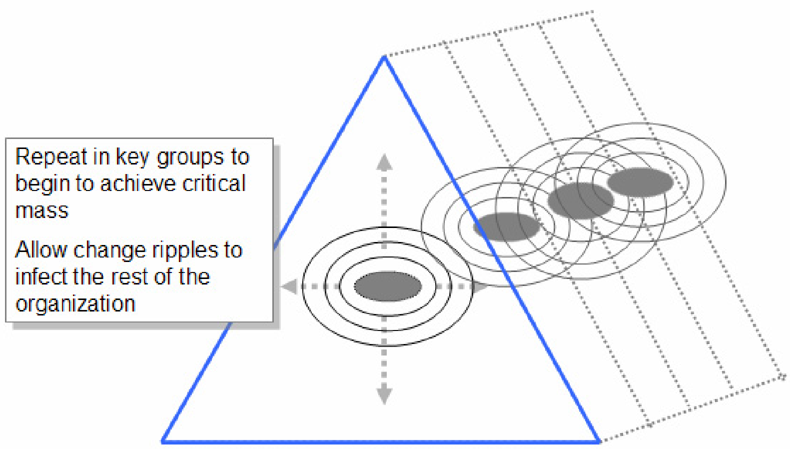

Figure 3. Creating change ripples in the organization:

In March 2006, a survey inviting employee feedback was conducted in the organization. When comparing the findings of the 504 employees in the "pilot" group with the 3,068 "control" employees in other regional groups, a statistically significant positive change was apparent in the pilot group in areas related to the client experience change project.

Employee Opinion Survey

Most Favourable Category Scores Ranked by Difference from Benchmark:

Bank client vision and values	+ 6
Employee engagement	+ 6
External client focus supplement	+ 5

Conclusion

More and more organizations recognize that today's customer is becoming all-powerful, and firms are searching for ways to respond more speedily to the need for a more customer-centric approach. However, it has been seen that even when the overall customer strategy is clear, the pace of change in traditional top-down matrix organisations is slow and cumbersome. More power is needed at the front-line to deal with customers. The ability to initiate change in behaviour appears to rest with mid- to low-level cross-functional teams of managers. It is at these levels that customer thinking can be incorporated into change planning and implementation.

The use of a solutions-focussed approach can facilitate leverage of a variety of change models, such as Roundtables, and speed up the implementation of internal organizational behaviours that reinforce customer-centric values. Building small-step plans, establishing collaboration accountability, and following through into mid-lower level management planning ensure the creation of immediate, visible, sustainable change. This approach has also been successfully applied in business-to-business organizations.

Maintaining a solutions focus throughout the implementation of branded customer experience can result in localized and swift dramatic shifts in organizational behaviours. This, in turn, leads to larger cultural, systemic change that is so crucial for organizations that must urgently respond to the changing needs of today's powerful customer.

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Hans-Peter Korn

Staging of Strategic Solutions for the Future Business

Keywords: Solution Focus; acting methods; business theatre; improvisation; role play; psychodrama; sociodrama

Summary

Finding solutions by talking about them is the usual setting to work with individuals and teams. Such "talking about" is often done in workshops, for example in sales and marketing to create ideas for new strategic products or services. But: How is it possible to "test" these strategies? And how is it possible in such workshops to slip much more into the shoes of the future customers to create the ideas from their point of view?

How would it be to have, in addition to "talking about", something like a "staging room" to try out possible future products and services in a realistic simulation of the future world of customers and competitors?

The "SolutionStage" [1] offers such a "space and time for adventures and solutions". It is a "staging room" to install and try out different versions of "realistic models" for working environments in organisations in a Solution-Focused way. Such "productions on stage" could be test environments for how different versions of strategic products or services will be seen and accepted by clients in future. Such "productions on stage" also could serve to create and test different typical settings of communications (with customers, managers with subordinates, within project teams) or different versions for work processes.

The core entities of these productions are the persons working in the company (not professional actors) acting as different "figures" (i.e. as clients). The figures and stories are not predefined (as it is done in most "role trainings") but are created by the acting persons. During the improvised performance they are supported by a coach as a "stage director". This coaching director is not the "author". He is only responsible for the "performance to go on". The acting persons are, in a Solution-Focused sense, the experts, owners and inventors of the performance and the "libretto".

In this paper I will start with a short description of a possible SolutionStage-application in the area of consultancy to give a first impression how the SolutionStage works.

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1 "SolutionStage" is a registered trade mark

After this I will discuss the principles behind SolutionStage, which are a merger of Moreno's "psychodrama" and "sociodrama" with the principles of Solution Focus.

Then I will describe and comment on a real business case done within an IT service provider with about 2000 employees, how this kind of Solution-Focused scenic work was used to invent and to test out ideas, how future services might fit future customers. And how these steps have been integrated into a workshop for defining and estimating strategic products/services for the future.

A SolutionStage "live experience" for Consultants and Trainer

Imagine you are attending a workshop or training together with other consultants and trainers. And imagine, all these participants are very interested to do a "Staging of Future Service-Solutions" focusing on their own business as consultants and trainers. And I am offering to act as "coaching director" for that. How will this work?

Well, due to the principle: "The acting persons are the experts, owners and inventors of the performance and the libretto" here I can only describe the rough plot offered as a "framework" for the improvised performance:

At the beginning I will offer the following:

I give you the chance to invent and try out some ideas of future service solutions for your own business as consultant, coach or trainer. And I propose to do that with methods releasing your potential for spontaneity and creativity. I will support you as a coach giving you space and time and a few "techniques" to do that. What are you thinking about this offer?

This "contracting" is done to clarify the goal and the over-all method. Sometimes in this "contracting" the goal changes and additional requests get agreed.

After this I will start with the process:

In our imagination the workshop-room now turns into a floor of a "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010"... there will be a lot of visitors looking for new methods and services and a lot of salesman offering - of course Solution-Focused - methods and services for different kinds of management-work. And, maybe, there will be some reporters from TV or radio stations interviewing some participants of that fare……

All participants are now invited to "build the scene": How does the room - as part of the "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010" looks like? Are there different stalls or something else?? Where? Is there a "meeting and refreshment zone"? After these few suggestions all participants are free to create together the scenery.

This first phase is a "warm up" to activate the individual spontaneity and the group cohesion to enable a positive response between all group members. This phase is a smooth way to enter the "wonderland", which is the space and time of the "future perfect", where new ideas and solutions can be found, leaving the limitations and concerns of the "present" behind.

In the next step the different figures and their intentions get staged:

> *Now I invite each of you to create your "figure" in this "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010": Maybe you want to be a seller of your services ... or a competitor of a specific seller in the same service area .... or a visitor ... or a very engaged buyer ... or a reporter…*
>
> *Please find your place in the room of the fare ... imagine what's around you ... maybe specific equipments for presentations ... or some furniture ... help yourself with the chairs, tables, flipcharts, pinboards to simulate your place ...*
>
> *I will give you a few minutes to prepare your place in a first version and then I will do very short interviews with each of you to learn more about your "figure".*
>
> This step serves to let emerge the different protagonists (sellers) and their antagonists (competitors, buyers, reporters). Doing it also "physically", by building the scene with real objects, makes it much easier to get into the mood of "wonderland" than just to talk about it. And the short interviews are helpful to create the own figure ("enrolment") and to give some inspirations to the other actors.

Now the free improvised "acting on stage" starts and takes about 15 to 20 minutes:

> *Please, act now in a free improvised way on this "Fare for Modern Management Methods 2010". Depending on the "flow" of the process maybe I will offer some specific "scenic techniques" to support the flow. We will see….*
>
> This phase of acting will be full of surprises…. and it cannot be predicted what will happen…

After that "staging of some ideas of future service solutions“ all will "jump back to the present" and will share and reflect the offered management methods and services: What are the benefits and chances of the offered methods and services?

If this "staging" would be part of a workshop to create ideas for new methods and services, at this point a longer phase to select the ideas with the best chances and to work them out on a more detailed level would follow.

What's behind that "staging"?

The Backstage of the "SolutionStage"

The "knots" of the organisational "net" in companies are acting persons. Persons with visions, intellectual capabilities, concerns, hopes, emotions, creativity, spontaneity …. and more or less useful (mis)understandings of others and their context.

How can these persons "act out" their creativity and spontaneity? How can they do that, not only "talking about it", but "live it" in a holistic way? How can they empower their ability to explore so far unthought-of solutions to transform organisations into "learning organisations" in the sense of "rooms for adventures" offering the possibility to try out how to create and change their individual realities and share them with other persons? (Senge 2001, 22) A "stage for business solutions" might be an answer.

The stage as test-lab

No serious engineer would start running a new manufacturing plant without having sufficiently tested it in a laboratory.

But how do we explore and test alternative ideas for solutions in difficult negotiations or conflicts? How do we design new process flows? Or new services? Do we only think about it in our minds and on the paper or do we explore and test our ideas also in a laboratory-like setting?

The "SolutionStage" is like a lab to exemplary develop and test things like:

- Visions and mission statements
- New ideas for products and services
- Conflict resolutions between individuals or groups
- Communication and presentation e.g. in the selling process
- Ideas for organizational changes

This "SolutionStage" also supports the perception of the organisational and social structure in which we act to liberate ourselves from the before unrecognized limitations and finally get the ability to work productively with these structures and to change them. (Senge 2001, 118)

The stage as a place for reflection

The productions on the "SolutionStage" are more than just funny games, they are and offer space for reflection. This is the intention of "theatre" in terms of Konstantin Stanislavsky (Stanislavsky 1950: p.92):

"If meaning of theatre was only the entertaining sight, perhaps it would not be worth putting so much work into it. But theatre is the art of reflecting life."

To explore the inner reality of the organisation in the context of in its acting individuals, "SolutionStage" can be seen as free space and a kind of laboratory. For example a project leader can experimentally take another position. And in the role play the realities and reciprocal actions of subjective worlds can be experienced and get explored. No one of us can know how another perceives a chair, how it is for someone else to feel anguish. And nobody can know someone’s interpretation of the seating arrangements of participants in a negotiation. The only thing we can do, is making these worlds an experience for all involved and to communicate about our perceptions, feelings and presumptions, hoping to expand the “consensual domain" (Maturana

1990: p.22). In order to work on common visions, individuals in organisations need space for interaction and communication to build this consensual domain.

SolutionStage – space for interaction and communication – don't act as a wailing wall or an arena for power games, but has a significant strategic purpose: to explore creative solutions in order to realize the common vision. And it's not about – unlike certain approaches in the therapeutic theatre – the reconstruction and the analytical descent into problems and their causes, but about the direct construction of solutions through future oriented prototypical action.

The roots of "SolutionStage"

SolutionStage as a method has two primary roots: On the one hand Jacob Levy Moreno's [1] Psychodrama and sociodrama, on the other hand the Solution-Focused approach by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer [2].

Jacob Levy Moreno, founder of psychodrama, sociometrics and group psychotherapie, was born 1889 in Romainia and died in 1974 in Beacon, N.Y. In the early 1920ies in Vienna he developed the "Theatre of Spontaneity" [3] - the root of "psychodrama" and "soziodrama".

In psychodrama *one* protagonist with his or her interpersonal relationships stands in the foreground. In sociodrama, group phenomena, collective relationships and social concerns like "globalisation“, “dealing with workplace bullying“, "reorganisation“, “unemployment“, “racism”, “violence in school” don't get investigated for a single person, but for whole groups of individuals (Schaller 2001: p.107 and Moreno 2001: p.51). With his work about the sociometrics, started during the First World War, Moreno created one of the most important basic principle for the systemic constellations (Moreno 1987: p.20 ff).

Spontaneity and creativity

The most important and closely related terms in Moreno's approach are *spontaneity* and *creativity*. According to Moreno, spontaneity is the appropriate answer to a new situation or the new answer to an old situation (Moreno 1934: p.336). He sees spontaneity as the probably oldest, universal existent, yet least developed force of a human being, often inhibited and discouraged through the socialisation process.

For Moreno, spontaneity and creativity are the driving forces for human progress.

This is his first hypothesis (Moreno 1934).

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[1] http://www.korn.ch/solutionstage/moreno-biographie/index.htm

[2] http://www.brief-therapy.org/people.htm

[3] http://www.vbkoe.org/jakob_levy_moreno__ueberblick.html

His second hypothesis is:

"I trust in people's intentions, in the love and mutual sympathy as powerful, indispensable principles of living within groups."

Thirdly, he proposed the hypothesis of an "*extremely dynamic community*, basing on these principles". (Moreno 2001, 29)

Psychodrama, in terms of Moreno, is much more than a method of role play.   *Psychodrama is a holistic system of methods for a scenic design and reflection of personal and social themes in the context of consulting / coaching, training / pedagogy and psychotherapy. It is characterised by a humanistic, resource oriented, trustful and optimistic attitude.*

Based on this attitude Moreno has developed his approach. The dimensions of his methods are:

- The philosophical system of time, space, reality and cosmos
- The instruments: Stage, protagonist, director, actors and spectators
- Process structure: Warming up, selecting the protagonist, commission's clarification, setting the scene, acting phase, final phase, sharing, role feedback and process analysis
- His concept of action
- His concept of roles
- The underlying techniques: assumption of roles, statues, constellations, role reversal, duplicating, mirroring

Hunger for action - and the discrepancy between talking and acting

In this article I'd like to highlight the dimension *"concept of action"*, because it discusses the difference between the "visible action" and the – for the setting in the consulting context usual – "talking about action".

Moreno uses the term "action" consciously to mark off from the behaviouristic "behaviour" as an entity of physical, psychical and mental functions in order to deal with life situations. Moreno was especially interested in the capacity of people for goal adequate and creative actions, which he lists in the concepts "spontaneity" and "creativity". According to Moreno, *beings hunger for expression and this "hunger for expression is foremost hunger for action, long before hunger for words"* (Zeintlinger 1996: p.147).

The base for creative performance are according to Moreno “cultural conserves”. With that he means what Popper (1998: p.64) defines as “third world of meaning or products of the human mind like myths, theories or inventions” (Zeintlinger 1996: p.170). We all have our subjective constructed ideas regarding these "cultural conserves“ in the sense of "mental models“ (Senge 2001: p.214). According to Senge, *our mental models not only provoke how we interpret the world, but also how we act.* In our action – and particularly in our action – our mental models, i.e. our personal perspective of the "cultural conserves“, become visible for others:

"Even if people not (always) act in accordance with their pronounced theories, nevertheless they act in accordance with their practiced theories"

quotes Senge (2001: p.214) Chris Argyris (1982).

Exactly on this *“discrepancy between verbalized behaviour* (like in interviews, free associativity tests, answers to questionnaires and so on) *and the behaviour in real life situations, in which verbalized behaviour only plays a secondary role”* Moreno already points at in the year 1941 (Moreno 2001: p.153).

The SolutionStage gives the chance to act authentically instead of publishing the subjective and implicit constructions of the (organisational)-cultural conserves.

This supports a common goal oriented action, by talking AND acting coherently.

Catharsis for solutions

Scenic action is closely related to the term *"Catharsis“*.

Stefan Meisiek says:

> *"Until the 4th century BC (in ancient Greece) catharsis was exclusively connected with medicine, and more precisely with ritual acts and feasts…The body was released from sicknesses through the ecstatic forms of ritual dances and feasts. Aristotle (384–322 BC) adopted the notion of catharsis and introduced it into classical theatre theory ... This transfer of the cathartic concept from ritual to drama started a continuing debate on the function of catharsis in theatre."* (Meisiek 2004)

And - again following Stefan Meisiek - there are three catharsis-related concepts which are useful to explain the effects of theatre in the context of consultancy and training:

> *First, according to Aristotle, theatre leads to release from negative affect:*
>
> *The eliciting of emotions is seen as a means of purifying related bad memories. Theatre is supposed to arouse feelings connected with recognized problems*

...thus allowing the audience to relive them passively and, because of their non-real presentation as drama, also to resolve them.

The second concept is Moreno's idea of a creativity-generating catharsis:

By drawing on negative experiences and actively reliving them on stage, participants can develop the creativity needed to find new solutions.

Third, Boal assumes that when an audience actively engages in the play by proposing solutions after an introductory scene has been performed, this serves as a test run for solving problems that are encountered in real life. The test in the play provides the audience with the necessary action motivation to overcome such problems.

Moreno's concept of catharsis bases on this belief:

If a person stages his or her problem, he or she can develop the creativity to find a solution for the problem.

Solution Focus in Moreno's psycho- and sociodrama

Going thought the sorrowful problem once again on Moreno's stage doesn't serve the analytical delving into the problem and its possible roots, but it is the starting point for discovering solutions. The technique of the psychodrama (assumption of roles, mirroring, doubling, choir) in connection with other methods like "Forumtheater" by Augusto Boal (1999) and "Playback Theater" by Jonathan Fox (1996), support the solution finding.

Even if the visible action in Moreno's psychodrama origins in the scenic design of the problem, it is Solution-Focused and not analytical. For me, the staging of the problem as the first scene is more an empathic recognition of the problem than a burden. The empathy for the protagonist's problem gives him or her the force to overcome the problem.

For me Moreno is one of the forerunners of the Solution-Focused attitude. Addressed to Sigmund Freud (who he met while he studied medicine in Vienna) he writes:

> "*Well Dr Freud, I start where you leave off. You meet people in the artificial setting of your office, I meet them on the street and in their home, in their natural surroundings. You analyze their dreams. I try to give them the courage to dream again. I teach the people how to play God." (Moreno 1946: p.5-6 in Blatner 1988: p.19)*

The psychodrama's practical application – especially as a therapy method and not in the pedagogical context – sometimes disconnects with Moreno's original claim and got affected by the different “schools”. Most of them make the same assumption: "Problems are caused and this cause can be found.” Steve de Shazer with his Solution-Focused brief therapy starts with a different question: "How do we construct solutions?” The past only gets focused on, when ideas for solutions – within the imagination of the “day after the miracle” – got developed. In the past we search for "forerunners of the solution“ – de Shazer calls them "exceptions“. It's about finding resources in the past to reinforce them and give confidence to achieve the "miracle solution“ step by step.

Moreno already wrote in 1939 about this Solution-Focused reflection of the past:

> *“Working with a psychotic patient one of the first steps is to find out how far he or she was able to create an imaginary reality.”*
>
> *(Moreno 2001: p.118)*

In 1940 Moreno wrote:

> *"In the center of the treatment is the patient, always, and the task of developing the psychodramatic process is, as much as possible, in his hands. The psychiatric director and the staff of auxiliary egos, act as prompters and foil for the patent as he acts out the various roles of his psychosis."*
>
> *(Moreno 1987: p.69)*

> *"The director must take great care to make no suggestion as to what course of action might be preferable. The therapeutic theatre is not a court, the auxiliary egos who may be present are not jury, and the director is not a judge. Moreover, the therapeutic theatre is not a hospital where the subjects come to show their wounds and have them healed by skilled professionals.*
>
> *The initiative, the spontaneity, the decision must all arise within the subjects themselves."*
>
> *(Moreno 1987: p.83)*

According to these sentences, the use of the psycho- and sociodrama in a consequent Solution-Focused way is a continuation of his 60 years ago formulated attitude.

Strengthening solutions on emotional and physical level

The consequent Solution-Focused use of the psycho- and sociodrama creates a “SolutionStage" for scenic developments of solutions in personal, factual and relationship questions within the corporate and private setting. This scenic work has a different quality than just pure verbal conversations. In the collection of different methods of the University of Cologne (Reich, Methodenpool), the impact is described with the following (translated by the author):

“In addition to the cognitive level there is the emotional and physical one. In psychodrama perspectives and possibilities for different actions can be emphasised by playing new roles. Spontaneity and creativity get trained. Through the group work the contact with others can be experienced intensely. Trying to involve everyone as much as possible increases the perception of the own person and the own needs… worth mentioning are especially the successes within the social learning. The personality development fosters through training and increment in empathy, role flexibility and distance, the psychical flexibility, liveliness, creativity, the spontaneity and communicative ability.

Mathias Varga von Kibéd described the totality of cognitive, emotional and physiological effects as *Semantic Reactions* in the sense of *Korzybski*´s general semantics. And he created the term "*Transverbality* ": Scenic methods are primary fields of application for the concept of transverbality. And also many everyday aspects of human behaviour in groups and communities can in a useful way be regarded as generalised linguistic processes, going *beyond verbal and nonverbal expression.* (von Kibéd 2006, chapter 1)

Business Case: Using "SolutionStage" for developing a strategy in a big IT company

In this case I will show, how some elements of the "SolutionStage" (and not the whole process as I described it in the beginning) can be merged with a typical (given) process for strategic marketing.

Starting point:

A department specialised on data warehousing with 40 people working there, of an IT service provider with over 2000 employees had to define the future service strategy. In this department worked especially IT developers with good knowledge of the market situation (customer needs and competitors). Therefore the service strategy should have developed in a three day workshop with as many employees of this department as possible. This strategy process was part of a whole process of the superior organisational unit.

The department manager expected that the most promising competence areas with the best chances and their customer groups became clear after the workshop. He was conscious that it was crucial for his department to develop a broadly supported strategy for the future services. Together we first developed the approximate frame of the workshop. One presetting was to start with his personal perspective of the division strategy. In this discussion about the workshop design he realised that he has no direct impact on how much of what he says will be understood by his employees. He even wanted to focus on this difference between what he says and what will be understood. This was the icebreaker for his agreement to involve different reflecting and scenic teamwork methods.

Workshop structure:

- *hearing and process of the department manager's input*
- *to map the department's vision*
- to gather the actual service areas
- *to evaluate the actual services from a client perspective*
- to define service areas and client groups
- using this defining the strategic business fields
- define criteria for the strategic positioning of the services for the dimensions "market attractiveness" and "competitiveness"
- to position with these criteria the different services (for today and the expected future)

For the italic printed phases we used scenic tools of the "SolutionStage". Here are the details of these three workshop-phases:

Listen to and process the department manager's input:

The department manager gave his speech in the usual manner about the theme "our vision" (around 20 minutes).

After that everyone (also the department manager) went to the break room next-door. In one corner there was a bar table and a row of chairs in front of it, so that the bar was kind of a stage. Everyone took a seat on those chairs. Then I introduced them to the following imagined situation:

> *"At this bar – the break room of the office – there are three employees, who haven't been to the department manager's speech. They have a "office-small talk". Another three employees, who have been to the speech join them and get catechised by the others, in order to get every single information the department manager said. And they also give their straightforward comments".*

This was possible, because there was a very open and collegial climate within this department.

{{Remarks about the methods of SolutionStage: Starting in the usual manner with the manager's speech the participants' expectations were met. Then it was possible to change the scene to the reflection level in a deliberate irritating manner: Everyone moved to a different room… as a sign that now also unusual things are all right. This "physical warm up" made it easier to accept and take part in the following "do as if-situation". Scene was the "break gossip" – a well known setting for everyone.}}

It was easy to find the six actors and the play could start. The others had the task to write down everything they heard in catchwords on post-its. The scene took about 10 minutes.

{{The as scene defined space – the imagined break zone – and the introduced situation is an accepted " aesthetical space" (Boal 1999, p.28) for all involved. For everything played and said on this stage there is a accepted silence, a "theatrical codex": The actors don't represent themselves, but "dramatic figures" (even if they represent themselves). And as dramatic figures they have the right for artistic "freedom" jester's license. The stage is a holy place and the actors "beings of an imaginary world". This allows the liberty of the illustration thanks to the silent lifeline: "Ok, it's only theatre… but there is a little truth in it..." The stage as "aesthetical space" therefore allows an intensity and radicalism of the reflection, like it would be impossible in a conversation, because the accepted code is a different one. "The aesthetic space has characteristics, which stimulates knowledge, cognition and recognition, characteristics, which reinforces the process of learning through experience." (Boal 1999, p.30)}}

After that everyone put their post-it on the suitable place on the pinboard, on which a tree with a sun, and clouds were drawn (see picture). The objects had the following meaning:

Sun = our uniqueness

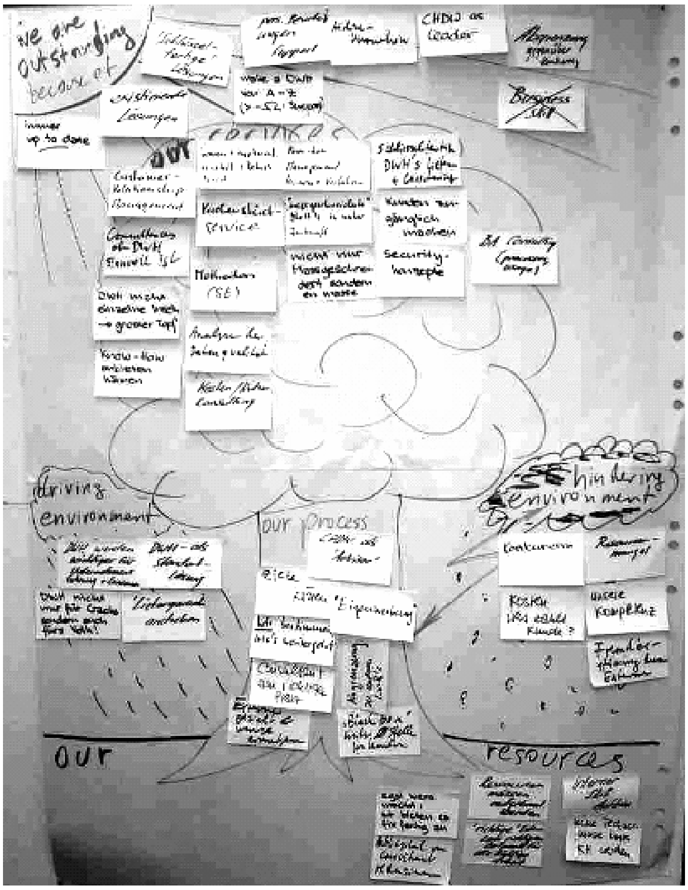
Treetop = our services

Stamm = our process

Rain clouds = things, which help us to grow

Thunderclouds = things, which complicate the work

Ground = our resources



Mapping the department's vision

Then certain things got clarified with the department manager:

- What corresponds to what he wanted to bring across in his speech?
- What is missing / what came across differently? (post-its got amended / corrected)
- What appears in the three, even if he didn't mention it – and is a further important aspect?

Result of it was a "cleaned image of our vision" as tree-metaphor with jointly corrected post-its.

> {{The task, to write the heard on post-its in order to create then a tree-image of the vision and the production transformed the silent observers into acting observers. The reflection about it happens while standing and moving (relocate and amende post-its) in front of a big schematic tree, with post-its on it. The whole room became an action stage, and the observers in terms of Boal, "spect-actors" (Boal 1999, p.24) }}

Evaluate today's services from a client perspective

Preceding this phase the departments' today's services got collected and structured with a brainstorming and the results (six flipchart sheets) presented as a display on the walls.

> {{The brainstorming wasn't done on the pinboards, but with sheets, which were laid-out on the floor and got pinned on the wall after structuring them. This was kind of a continuation of the "tree-picture"-creation.}}

This phase took place before the lunch, in order to have enough distance for the phase "evaluate today's services from a clients perspective".

After lunch the employees entered the workshop room with those pictures on the wall in the role of different interested customers and beneficiaries of these services. They got into their self defined roles and discussed the offers quite critical. They noted things they liked on green sheets above the flipcharts.

> {{This phase corresponded to what has been mentioned in the first section: "A Solution-Stage 'live experience' for Consultants and Trainer".}}

The following working phases

This was the base for the following "conventional" built working phases:

- to define service areas and client groups
- using this defining the strategic business fields
- define criteria for the strategic positioning of the services for the dimensions "market attractiveness" and "competitiveness"
- to position with these criteria the different services (for today and the expected future)

Thanks to this scenic beginning phase there was enough energy and motivation there to deal with the quite top-heavy phases. And everyone was clear that it's about customers, whose perspective got experienced in the simulation.

Together with around 20 participants the expected result could be achieved in this workshop. At the end of the third day the services for each strategic business field regarding market attractiveness and competitiveness (for today and the expected future) was positioned. At the same time the knowledge transfer between the specialists got enhanced.

Conclusion

The "SolutionStage" as a Solution-Focused application of psycho- and sociodrama allows, through the inclusion of physical acting and not only talking people, an increase of the creativity in finding solutions. It makes an important difference, whether that what on the "day after the imagined miracle with which the problem disappeared" is different and better based on a conversation or on a "test stage in wonderland". On the test stage it is experienced through physical acting and the words get experimentally transferred into exemplary actions in different varieties.

The aspect of physical visible and in the physical encounter tactile action enhances the linguistic communication and interaction. It can be used particularly for solution findings in the corporate setting. Especially there it is helpful to break through and enlarge practiced dominant linguistic communication patterns.

This enhancement of the communication and interaction releases creativity, which is essential for example in the development of strategic important products and services. In this article I have introduced a case study about that.

"SolutionStage" as a Solution-Focused scenic work is not a behaviour training and no game with given cases and stories, but a free improvisation. It enables and make easier:

– the use of potential, which stays unexploited by only talking about solutions and get activated within "solution acting"
– the release of additional experiences about everything which works better
– the concrete test, focus and practice of attitudes in which it works better

This Solution-Focused scenic work gets supported by a director as a process supporting coach with the goal that the actor's ideas can develop out of the figures and stories. This corresponds to the Solution-Focused basic principle, which Moreno formulated for the psycho- and sociodrama.

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Solution-Focused Improvement of the Customer Segmentation Process[1]

Keywords: Solution-Focused management, customer segmentation process, customer value, customer prioritization, resource allocation, sales and marketing interaction, goal alignment

Introduction

Nowadays, building alliances externally is not enough. Especially in critical business processes like allocating resources (people, time, money), i.e. prioritizing customers and products based on their value to the company, functional departments like sales and marketing have to work closely together to trigger the right decisions. But these processes typically create a lot of friction within the system, in particular between sales, marketing and management.

Working with the right customers is the key to success; customer profitability analysis has produced some startling results: In many cases the most profitable 20 percent of customers generate 150 to 300 percent of a company's total profits. The middle 70 percent of customers generally break even while the least profitable 10 percent of customers lose 50 to 200 percent of total profits (Bozada/ Marriott, 2004, p. 26.).

This article shows how to use SF techniques to radically improve a business process to focus sales and marketing people on attractive opportunities (i.e. those customers and products with the highest value to the company), and how to improve day to day management of a multinational sales force.

The Task

A multinational company in the chemical industry wanted to increase sales through a clear focus on managing opportunities focused on products and customers with the highest profitability. The process of establishing sales priorities should be streamlined on a supra-regional basis, i.e. start in one country and subsequently roll out the process throughout the whole region with a total of 250 sales people (management plus staff).

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1 Customer Segmentation is the process of identifying groups of customers or prospects with similar characteristics.

The situation at hand was similar to the one of Crompton Corporation at the end of 2003. As its CEO Bob Wood put it: *"We must examine and improve our customer management, shifting the mindset of our sales and marketing people from volume to value. Today, we do business with too many customers who destroy value and the same is true of the products that we produce." (Wood, 2004)*

The decision for bringing in an outside consultant was based on the following observations which had been collected in a SWOT process:

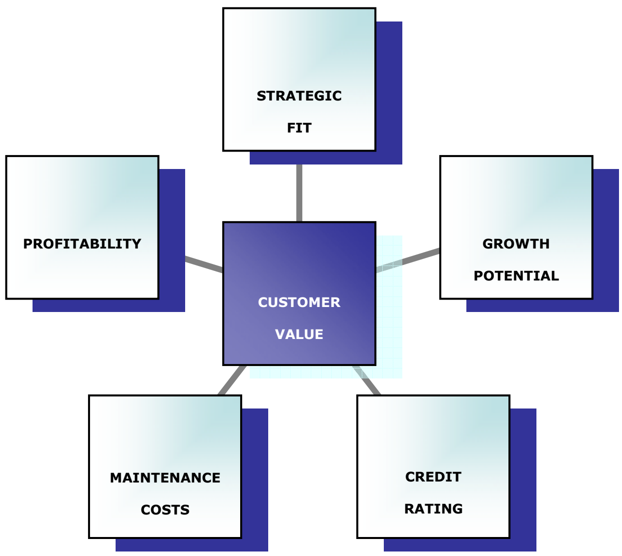
- "We don't know which customer is important to us."
- "There are actually customers that destroy value."
- "We treat everyone the same, profitable or not."
- "Customers don't seem to value our efforts!"

The Approach

Before the consultants were hired the client had decided to implement a process, which categorizes customers based on value to the business and fit to the overall strategy. The goal was to combine the standard customer valuation with a quantitative approach for resource allocation.

They wanted a thorough understanding of customer profitability, which certainly is key to success in today's competitive environment. All critical resources should be allocated to the next best increment of return; any business which destroys value should be stopped.

The following criteria have been used for the customer evaluation:



The classical approach or project layout would be as follows:

1. Formulate customer segmentation strategy.
2. Decide on customer segments and define criteria to assign customers accordingly.
3. Establish numerical rating model.
4. Tie customer segmentation model to information system.
5. Assign service rules to each segment in line with business strategy.

The downside of this approach is, that it does not take the systemic view into consideration and does not give any guidance on the implementation: *"... building effective relationships with customers ... will depend in part (and possibly in large part) on the strengths and types of relationships built with employees and managers inside the organization."(Baker, 2003, p. 532)*

The Implementation Struggle

The company was functionally organized where marketing "owns" the products and sales "owns" the customers. What does "owns" mean? It means that the marketing organization is accountable for product management, i.e. the cradle to grave life cycle and profitability management of each product line. Marketing has the authority to launch a new product via product development and can take products off the market if they do not meet the targets any longer. The sales organization is accountable for the profitability of each customer.

Those goals can, and should be conflicting at certain times: e.g. questions like "Who decides ultimately on a price?", "Who decides which customer to give preferred access to new products?" and so on.

In addition the consultants faced very different agendas:

	Marketing	**Sales**	**Management**
Official Goals	Maximize Product Profitability	Maximize Customer Profitability	Maximize Bottom Line Profitability
Hidden Agenda	Dictate Pricing Tell sales what to do	Retain customers at all price Avoid being made accountable	Increase control & transparency

After a series of interviews with some key people the process got stuck in a power struggle between sales and marketing. Especially when trying to establish clear standard prioritizing rules the people involved did not manage to align the different agendas.

The Solution

Following Solution-Focused principles (DeJong / Berg, 2002, p. 288-311), the consultants attempted to help the company identify 'what works' so that they can do more of those things, in as simple a way as possible.

- See the client as expert of his situation
- Respect the team's frame of reference
- Focus on solutions
- Look for resources and strengths of the own team and the other
- Build upon former successes
- Concentrate on the interaction, not on the behavior of single people
- Articulate concrete, behavioral, measurable goals

After serious considerations with the management the consultant took this revolutionary, i.e. Solution-Focused, approach for this client and offered to facilitate a series of workshops where sales, marketing and management people were invited to work on "our vision of customer prioritization".

During these workshops there was room for complaining[1] (which was gradually turned into investigation what meanings the parties ascribe to the complaint by asking them how they think things will be like when these problems are solved (De Shazer, 1985, p. 39), fact finding and, most important, appreciation based on recent successes. Furthermore, conflicts got addressed and attendants received the signal that different opinions generally had the same value. Step by step, they started to learn to listen to each other and to look into the future rather than into the past.

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[1] For example, marketing people mentioned in the internal workshop:
- "Salespeople ignore corporate branding and positioning and just do their own thing."
- "We generate leads and create sales support materials that get ignored."
- "We don't know what collateral works or what is being used."
- "We are swamped with sales requests for ad hoc support."
- "Sales is slow to learn about new products - getting them up to speed takes forever."

For example, sales people mentioned in the internal workshop:
- "The one-size-fits-all corporate message doesn't help me close orders."
- "Marketing wouldn't know a qualified lead if it tripped on one."
- "We can't find the sales support materials we need - and when we do, it isn't targeted to my selling situation."

Based on the outcomes of these workshops, the consultant developed and introduced a web based software to capture each future market opportunity and combined that with an online system to prioritize those opportunities.

In a couple of meetings with change agents from each group they designed the future perfect for a helpful tool and specified the requirements. Each individual manager had the opportunity to assign a certain priority to the opportunities. Those priorities were then matched and conflicting priorities automatically kicked up to the next management level for resolution.

The tool was then designed to help register and prioritize sales opportunities, track their progress, and forecast their financial impact. It is easy to use and quickly provides the information you need to answer the important questions, "Do you know what is in your sales pipeline? ... What is the value? ...When will it hit? ... Which opportunities are most important? ...What are the next steps?"

On top of that the new system helped to:

1. Establish a joint understanding of the value of opportunities in pipeline and align behavior of sales and marketing team accordingly.
2. Constantly validate strategy by contrasting actual sales and marketing work in process with strategy.
3. Focus the entire organization on the highest priority work and efficiently allocate resources based on facts.
4. Increase accountability of sales and marketing organization and track progress of major individual projects.
5. Eliminate non-value added data gathering expeditions by sales organization for senior management.
6. Simplify planning process. Prepare budgets and forecasts using clear data about sales in the pipeline.
7. Provide continuity for all projects despite personnel changes at the company, or changes by customers and suppliers.
8. Review ongoing projects (globally) with key customers and suppliers using clear standardized reports.

Helpful Meetings

It was clear, that market segmentation is not an end in itself, it's what the marketing and sales organizations do with the segments that really counts. After implementation and additional training on the web tool they installed an international monthly sales and marketing meeting, discussing priorities and aligning actions of the different departments accordingly.

Helpful questions or topics of theses meetings were:

- Picture the ideal customer
- How can we bring in customer needs (e.g. with role play)?
- Shift this topic to the view of the customers
- Ask: By Monday, how will the customer notice the difference?
- How do we bring in the heart (e.g. celebrate successes)?
- Share – even small – success stories with colleagues in other countries
- Ask: What can we do for the others?
- Start with "Suppose we have an ideal sales and marketing meeting, …" and write down the visible results
- Foster appreciation of marketing and sales people
- Look for the resources (within their teams, other teams etc.)

All people involved gained confidence in each other's capabilities and good will to work on the common goal "customer satisfaction", supported by a tailored web tool that simplified the customer segmentation process.

The change process was continuously monitored to evaluate the change. Feedback given by team members on the question "How did you manage to bridge the gap between Sales and Marketing?" produced amongst others following answers:

- *"We manage to cross-pollinate our sales and marketing teams by exchanging insights and success stories."*
- *"Identifying the bottlenecks was a first step to minimize them."*
- *"Aligning on key messaging is very helpful in the day-to-day business."*
- *"We got new leads by reviewing the customer acquisition process together."*
- *"We figured out that it is easier to agree on demand/lead definitions upfront to avoid time consuming discussions afterwards."*

On the management side, the following observations were collected in a feedback session:

- *We see a reduction of conflicts about where the company should be going.*
- *Our company has now improved communications and a common framework for decision-making.*
- *We as management are encouraged to think ahead systematically.*
- *It's a fact, that available resources can now be better matched to opportunities.*
- *The process has provided a framework for the continuing review and monitoring of operations.*

Key SF Learnings

- Every case is different, standard rules do not capture the complexity of key decisions.
- "In between" – the action is the interaction – it's all about learning from different. perspectives. Let sales and marketing work it out together.
- Look into the future instead of the past.
- Simplify the decision making process, while leveraging the existing expertise of each department.
- A systematic approach to strategy formulation leads to a higher return on investment and real competitive advantage.
- *"You should have an escalation about the future rather than about the past"*[1]

Conclusion

Marketing and sales, two key departments of every large to medium company – is it struggle or collaboration? It's no surprise that in many companies the struggle prevails, especially if the management has not set any priorities. If the "in between" isn't working, their attempt to define and find the "ideal market i.e. customer" must fail. Looking together for opportunities rather than theoretically defining specific customer segments was the main learning for the people involved in the above case.

Establishing and maintaining credibility of Marketing and Sales organizations to each other was the main point. Besides the web tool, which gave them a handy possibility to identify opportunities, all people involved had to re-learn to listen to each other, to accept the expertise of each other and to build on shared experiences. Neither ready-made recipes nor over-simplified "let's work together" messages were the key to success, but the willingness to openly share knowledge and work together on better solutions brought the right results.

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[1] Quote of Insoo Kim Berg in an SF Workshop in Toronto, October 2004

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Using Solutions Focus in an Effective Sales and Influencing Process

Keywords: solutions focus, sales training, client engagement, professional services, coach the coach client recruitment, successful selling, solutions focused management

Summary

A case study that demonstrates the successful use of Solution Focus with a team of Business Development Advisers whose role was "selling" the services of one of the UK's universities to industry. Delegates were engineers, bio-scientists, chemists and physicists, who were well versed in their own disciplines but (supposedly) lacking the softer skills required of them in "selling" the services of their departments.

The programme consisted of three workshops running over a six month period. Success was achieved, in classical SF terms, by helping them to identify what was currently working and building on it.

After taking the conscious decision not to identify SF as such, the advisers were introduced to the concepts through exercises, to help them to identify what they were currently doing that worked well, in terms of the selling process, personal rapport and success in selling and persuasion. They were then offered a framework to use, enabling them to enhance these inherent competences, once their conscious minds had recognised them. Having articulated some of their successes delegates were encouraged to define their future (imagined) success six months down the line, to take ownership and develop an implementation plan, using scaling and miracle question type conversations both in their learning and in their interactive exchanges with clients and potential clients.

Client Briefing

In the summer of 2005 a UK university commissioned a piece of work for their Business Development Advisers. The adviser role is to sell the university's services to industry and the intention was to "train them to sell". As a team they represented various disciplines; biomedical, engineering, computer science, applied science and the management school. The word "team" was something of a misnomer. They were in the very early (forming) stage of operating a matrix management model. This "team" of 25, dedicated to the business development function were line managed by their respective departments and lead by a "Head of Business Development", who had the support from a steering group of 5 (representing each department).

To help to clarify everyone's expectations from the "Sales Training", there was an initial meeting with the team leader and steering group. Whilst the conventional questions were posed regarding the Development Team's levels of competence, objectives, critical success factors and metrics, there was an additional tool in the armoury – Solutions Focus! What in any other circumstances might have been planned as a "consultant briefing", in practice the meeting held major elements of a "Solutions Focused Team Coaching" session.

When speaking of their "measures of success" the steering group were somewhat challenged in articulating what success might look like. As might be appreciated however, when put in the context of the "miracle question" (Jackson / McKergow, 2002), they became "unstuck". In the language of "future first", the biggest impact the programme would have was the noticeable increase in the confidence demonstrated by the development team in fulfilling their respective roles. They would also have increased "visibility" in their market place, be more effective in demonstrating to clients the benefits of collaboration, be able to see situations from their customers' viewpoint and converse in their "customers' language". However, acquiring new clients in this context identified an additional problem. Having successfully engaged with the industrial client, the advisers had, in parallel, to engage with their academic colleagues and convince them that the work was going to be interesting enough academically to satisfy them. They had in effect two types of customer to satisfy.

As might have been anticipated, some of the advisers appeared more able than others to acquire new clients. Training these people to "sell", could have been construed as an insult and the university wanted to encourage as many as possible to participate, so they avoided the word "selling" and agreed to call the programme *"Making Connections – support in client engagement"*. As individuals, members of the team were each achieving different levels of success but they weren't all aware of it. The environment was such that they worked in various degrees of isolation, inevitably they would have lots to share. Although the original concept was to deliver a "standard sales workshop", after the consultant briefing, it was decided that for the programme to be as effective as possible and deliver their "dream", it had to be Solutions Focused through and through and also incorporate an element of "coach the coach".

Workshop Format

The Development Team was split into two groups (A and B) and the programme was to run twice, with each group meeting every other month over a six month period. The original format was to demonstrate the need for a (selling) "process", explain the importance of rapport and show them tips and techniques for effective selling. It was felt that by overlaying a Solutions Focused approach it would help them to highlight what was already working, share it, build upon it, have them go out and apply some of the SF tools themselves and report back on the success that this enabled.

There was a carefully prepared opening for workshop 1 and this is specifically referred to later. As indicated previously, delegates, whilst being part of the same team, were drawn from their respective departments across the university campus. Some had not even met before, so introductions were even more important than usual. The opening exercise comprised of "Solutions Focused personal introductions":

Opening Exercise

(This part of the exercise is to be undertaken in pairs. You are to interview one another for 3-4 minutes each, with the interviewer taking sufficient notes to be able to feedback).

1. Think of a time when you were in a hugely successful in influencing, persuading, selling yourself, a service, a product or getting agreement to one of you ideas – after which you felt energised, fulfilled and most effective – and you were able to accomplish even more than you had imagined. (this can be in any situation, work or whatever, but it must be real and personal).Tell the story about the situation, the people involved.
2. Without being humble, what was it about you that contributed to that success? Describe in detail these qualities and what you value about yourself that enabled such success.
3. Interviewers are to report back their findings in plenary session in order to identify some of the inherent elements that support successful engagement.

On each occasion, within an hour of the start of Session 1 groups were sharing current selling and influencing successes. Asking them to interview each other avoided the "it's not proper to brag about your success" element in their psyche. The ones who thought they were less able were proved wrong by their partner's interpretation of their interview answers. The ones who felt they were already "able" were able to share their successes in a similar way. For those who found "selling" alien (or beneath them), "selling" (or client engagement) was nothing new to them, they were already doing it!

Having "broken the ice", they were posed a further question:

> It is the spring of 2006 and the Business Development team has functioned more successfully than any of you might have imagined. What are you doing, how did you work differently, what does this success look like, and how did you make it happen?

Not surprisingly, there was no shortage of answers and no shortage of enthusiasm. The answers were charted to be referred to later.

What followed then was an introduction to and explanation of three selling processes: The Traditional, The Consultative and the Breakthrough Selling Process (Sproson, 2005). After making the point that all three processes are ineffective unless the "seller" has built up sufficient rapport with the prospect, the group moved on to discover some of the secrets of building such vital rapport.

Building Rapport

The group was asked to each reflect on occasions when they had entered a room full of strangers at maybe a party or business convention. Did they sometimes appear to gravitate towards particular individuals? After a while would a "fly on the wall" observe their behaviour as one attributed to that of "long lost friends" perhaps?

They continued with the following exercises to illustrate the fact that they were already (albeit unconsciously) experts at developing rapport.

Exercise 2

(This exercise is to be undertaken in pairs. One of you is A and the other B)

PART 1

A thinks of some past experience which has some emotional charge to it, strong associated feelings, either positive or negative. **A** silently reruns the memory of the experience in their mind, just like a film, and gets the feelings back.
B's job is to match **A's** physiology exactly: Sit in the same way, copy their breathing and breathe in sync with them. Match any facial expressions or gestures. If they move around in their seat, do the same. Match everything (apart from closing their eyes if A closes theirs).
Match **A** for a couple of minutes

PART 2

B tells **A** how they **<u>felt</u>**. NOT what they thought **A** was feeling, **<u>but how they actually felt</u>** while matching them. If anything springs to mind regarding what the event might be, tell them that as well.

When you have done that, swap over and do it the other way.

Exercise 3

(This exercise is to be undertaken in pairs)

Find a subject on which you both agree.
Talk about the subject on which you agree, while deliberately mismatching physiology.
Do that for 2 minutes and notice what happens.

Find a subject on which you both disagree.
Discuss that subject on which you disagree while maintaining rapport and matching physiology.
Do that for 2 minutes and notice what happens.

Feedback from Exercise 2 demonstrated "in their own words", that when they matched the other person's physiology they could sense the emotions that their partners were reliving. In Exercise 3, they became quite animated upon realising their conclusions. When matching their partner's physiology, not only did they find a tendency to agree but they found it much easier to "agree to disagree". They were then asked to once again recall the “room full of strangers” in their own minds. After some rather interesting questions and answers, a number of them realised that they were “unconsciously” matching physiology. They now acknowledged that they had a “natural competence” to develop rapport and after sharing some experiences of this having worked successfully in their favour, they were offered some suggestions as to how they might build on this to develop early rapport, and also how they might “break rapport” when appropriate.

They went on to be shown an outline of the different representational systems we posses and how these manifest themselves in physiology and language. The fact that “visual” people are interested in how something “looks”, “auditory” in how something sounds and like to be “told” how they are doing, and those who are “kinesthetic” need things to “feel” right to them. A reference was made to the opening of session 1.This used an opening scenario that demonstrated the effective use of all the above systems to enable the workshop leader to connect with the group and develop rapport as early as possible, whether individuals were visual, auditory or kinesthetic types. At this stage of the workshop it was referred back to as a recent example of successful rapport building. By encouraging a group to share not only what was working for them in developing rapport in the client situation, but also to have experienced how the workshop leader developed rapport with them only hours ago, it further underlined the power of focusing on “what works and doing more of it”. Having guided both groups along the path to “joint discovery” of some Solutions Focus fundamentals, this moment can be only described as something of a “watershed” or collective “aha” moment.

Success in Selling

The focus then returned to the “Selling Process” to enable the group to explore more of its (yet unrecognised) successes.

It’s often been suggested that one of the reasons that many professionals don’t like “selling” is because of the connotations associated with the word “sales”. They consider selling to be persuading people to buy something they neither want nor need, and often manipulating them against their will. They don’t want to be branded as a “sales person” because no one likes them (and everyone wants to be liked). They don’t like “pushy sales people”, so the members of the groups were advised not to “behave like pushy sales people”. As a consequence, in accepting that it’s better to “walk away”, whenever their solution did not satisfy the customer need (rather than forcing the prospect into accepting their solution) they would find that helped to reduce the pressure in the sales situation and distance them further from the “pushy sales stereotype”. One premise put forward was that people buy for their own (personal) reasons, not the sales person’s, not even their company’s. Consequently, it’s only by adopting a questioning technique that ultimately establishes that reason, that the process can be moved forward. The group were asked for agreement. In one group, apart from the support of one delegate, there was disagreement. This offered an opportunity to ask for examples to evidence this disagreement; evidence that would offer an example of success without drilling down to the personal level. As each came forward to illustrate their argument, not only were they questioned further but the erstwhile supporter entered into the questioning. The groups came to realise that because they had (often unwittingly) struck a chord at a personal level it had enabled them to achieve success. They were then helped to identify elements that they themselves were already adopting that lead them to success and asked for suggestions as to how their technique might be improved upon. Sessions with both groups followed the same pattern and each appeared to naturally "drift" into a scaling exercise. They were at ease in articulating some of the small steps and the possibilities that this opened up to them and not only that, they saw them as achievable.

More "Small Steps"

At the beginning of the first session both groups had been enthusiastic in describing what their success would look like at the end of the programme. At the end of this session they returned to this vision and were asked to describe it in more detail and proceeded to take ownership for a specific number of elements. They worked in pairs (pairs who would then become "buddies") to tell each other where they each currently they stood as effective contributors to this vision on a 1 to 10 scale. Their next challenge was to support each other over the subsequent two month period to enable the team to move up the scale one or two points. They would celebrate their success in sessions number two!

At the beginning of session two both groups reported various levels of success. However, one notable change that had come about was an enhanced ability to look for what was working. There were comments such as "before I started this programme, I was unable to describe how I did things (successfully). I can do that now and in doing so, I'm able to identify what works well and that gives me the chance to do more of it".

Apart from sharing recent successes and supporting team working, the content of session two was geared to offer tips and techniques they may find useful in improving their engagement process. It was only at this stage that they were (formally) referred to Solutions Focus. The groups looked back at some of the common threads of the workshops and in identifying "what works and doing more of it", had shared experiences of how effective this was. It then seemed logical to stop and introduce it in a little more detail. There was no need to convince them about its effectiveness, they had already experienced it. Furthermore, on the basis that "you may find this useful, may I demonstrate", there was enthusiastic participation in a number of SF exercises, in particular a "Reflective Team Exercise", with the subject claiming that never before had he been complimented half way through a project, if he received any compliments at all, it would only happen at the end! - What a superb motivator!

Interaction with Clients

Having now overtly "exposed" them to the SF approach in the client engagement programme and having demonstrated its effectiveness, ideas were canvassed from the groups as to how they might use some of the techniques themselves when involved in the engagement process. It appears that one difficulty the Development Team often faced was in overcoming a company's apparent inability to recognise the need to innovate. Some quite plainly had little concern for product life cycle, blaming market downturn for a drop in sales. The advisers immediately saw the benefits of using the "miracle question" as part of their scenario in helping customers to articulate a future vision and utilise scaling to help them appreciate how that vision might be achieved. Another suggestion was to use the "what else" question, when identifying "personal" reasons for making decisions.

Conclusion

The simplicity of the Solutions Focus approach has enabled it to be introduced into the selling process with positive effect. In an area where "selling", whilst necessary, is often seen as a "necessary evil", particularly where professional services are concerned, anything that helps dispel myths about the process might be expected to be welcomed. Solutions Focus was! On this programme it appears to have made a major contribution towards dispelling some of these myths and demonstrated that individuals are so often unaware of the selling and persuasive talents that they are already successfully applying on a day to day basis.

The team who were introduced to SF in this way have taken the concept to heart. How effective they will be in the long term, only time will tell. So far, so good!

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Human Resource Management

Günter Lueger

Solution-Focused Assessment: New Ways of Developing HR-Instruments

Keywords: HR-Instruments, assessment, rating, performance management, analysis, change in behaviour, motivation, 360-degree feedback, evaluation.

Summary

Most of the HR-management instruments in use do not fit into systemic thinking like the solution-focused approach, because they very often focus on deficits or analyse failures and weaknesses, or concentrate on particular traits. In this paper it will be shown how to overcome the pitfalls of traditional HR instruments through the use of principles of Solution-Focused Assessment and how to design new or redesign traditional HR instruments in an SF-way

Instruments of HR management, such as 360-degree feedback, assessments, staff surveys or evaluations, are used with the aim of effecting changes amongst staff. Through discussion between employers and employees, for instance, measures are to be developed that have a positive influence on performance behaviour (e.g. a change in how customers are dealt with). 360-degree feedbacks generally are intended to further leadership behaviour and to work out measures for a more effective leadership. The main focus of the use of HR instruments should therefore be the desired state, and thus the future, of the workplace, and the motivation and commitment for implementing measures should be achieved (see Lueger 2002).

In reality, "classic" HR instruments often achieve the exact opposite. Traditional instruments focus too much on the actual situation (in fact the past) and force the assessors to commit on individual values (e.g. on scales) or statements on "what's the situation" (with qualitative methods). Additionally, the differences important for finding solutions are neglected. In many cases it thus becomes impossible to focus properly on the next steps to be taken and the future. This paper aims to show that changes effected through procedures used in business practice – settling on a value that does not take differences into consideration - will become MORE DIFFICULT. Therefore, a "Change in the design of HR instruments" is called for, which can overcome the difficulties of an insufficient willingness to change, the demotivation of staff, as listed below, through these instruments. "Solution-focused assessment" is presented as an alternative based on the principle of detecting and analysing "differences that make a difference". The aim is to make clear that SFA is not a single method, but a concept for designing methods. Apart from this different conceptual

approach, options for the different use of language and the use of different content dimensions are also shown.

This article refers to the paradigm of constructivism, following which realities do not exist "per se", but have been constructed. Against this backdrop, management instruments in a company are, in the author's opinion, gaining importance: depending on which aspects are included and how they are constructed, very different constructions of reality by the actors can become possible when using these instruments. And these constructions can focus more on problems or on solutions. The latter is supported by Solution-Focused Assessment.

Effects of HR instruments

HR management practitioners and managers know that two typical variants of reactions from persons involved can be discerned when using HR instruments:

- Are the results shown by the respective instrument good, the participants tend to be satisfied and everything remains as it is
- Are the results mediocre or bad, the persons concerned often do not, or only perfunctorily, accept the assessments (e.g. in staff interviews, surveys…). As a result, no real changes take place.

Studies (e.g. Bernardin et al. 1995) also show this pattern, where bad results lead to demotivation and no changes in behaviour. This means that the objective behind the use of HR instruments is not achieved exactly when it would be most important: where performative behaviour should be changed and measures be taken.

In the author's opinion, the central problem lies in the fact that the procedure in quantitative and also qualitative assessment forces the assessors to give an "either/or", which results in a person being either "good" or "bad". This in turn creates a deficit and weaknesses (e.g. when a superior tells his employee: "she is only moderately customer-oriented") that are solely the result of the method used, or put differently: concept and design of the HR instruments results in constructions of reality that create attributed weaknesses in such a way that it will highly likely result in resistance.

In addition, the focus of the analysis is very much on the question "What is the situation like?" and not enough on "What should it be?". It is exactly here that the concept of SFA comes in and provides a link between the actual and the desired situation, by describing the relevant differences of the individual criteria and dimensions under analysis (see further below for the SFA procedures).

The creation of a "non-changeability trance" through traditional HR instruments

As HR instruments consistently concentrate on the question "What is it like?" and neglect any differences, the participants develop a construction of reality resembling a "stability trance" concerning the features under analysis and so the development of change targets becomes more difficult and often even impossible.

The question "What is it like?" rests on the assumption that this question can be meaningfully answered by using survey methods. And this is definitely not the case! This does not so much refer top the principle that there are no descriptions independent from the observer, but the neglect of a basic theorem of change management: "The only thing that's constant is change!"

Exactly this basic principle is undermined by how HR instruments are used in practice. An example illustrates this: Let's assume the analysis of the current situation including a scale shows that the "total performance" of a staff member is 2 (on a 5-part scale). If, for instance, this value is discussed by the employee concerned and his superior, in most cases the following dynamics can be observed: the employee refers to examples where he finds his performance "very good" or at least good (and there naturally are examples of this, as there are enough projects and individual events), while the superior refers to examples and experiences where it was difficult and problematic. The more examples are listed (even if just the same examples are repeated in a louder voice) that refer to positive experiences, the more examples and details referring to negative events will be listed by the other person. It is fairly obvious that this reinforces latent or manifest conflicts.

This pattern, however, is not so much set off by conscious strategies employed by the participants, but rather resembles a "conceptual trap of the survey methods" with the methods of diagnosis and assessment used. The conversation has to take place in a "prison" of "either/or" and the participants cannot escape to an "as well as" because of the traditional design of the instruments.

Analyses involving traditional HR instruments and the range of methods used therefore are of a reality-stabilising nature and are thus inherently averse to change: they guide our perception towards establishing "What is it?" and therefore towards one individual value.

In fact, these differences naturally exist, as an employee's performance is sometimes good and sometimes less so (see the graph in figure 1). And we all know from experience that each aspect analysed in HR is sometimes bad and sometimes good. Exactly these differences constitute the "ideal solution of change", as it signals confidence and that sometimes it can be better. In addition, showing differences provides a link between past and future, as well as between "better" and "worse". Making use of these differences, however, requires other methods of analysis – for these see further below.

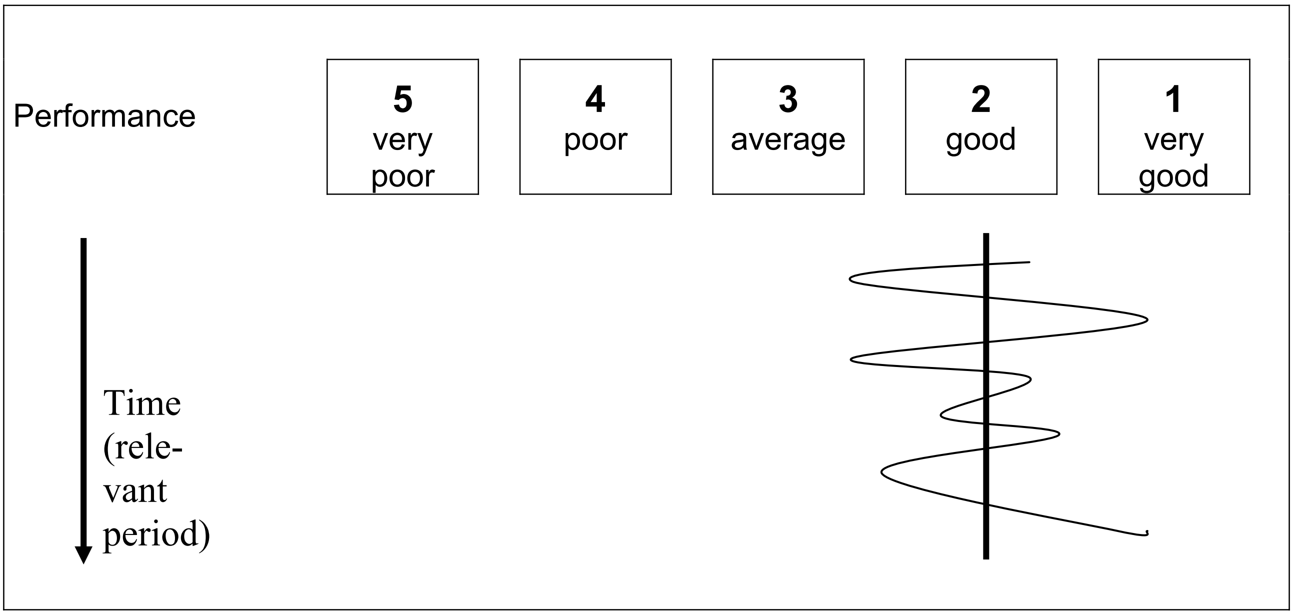

Figure 1: Stability versus variability of dimensions

With qualitative procedures, the same phenomenon can be encountered, unless we record the differences that make a difference. If, for example, a workshop records the quality of cooperation in a team and visualises this on cards, there will, for instance, be statements such as "no confidence" or "insufficient exchange of information" etc. This way of presenting information also creates a reality-stabilising effect, unless the methods make it possible to record and visualise the differences with "confidence" or "information exchange".

In this manner, the traditional HRM instruments create the perception of a non-changeability by the method (!). The reality-stabilising effect of focusing on individual values results in the "annihilation of differences that make a difference" and so suggest to the participants that relevant phenomena such as structures and in particular people simply are the way they are. In slightly more abstract terms: the methods used result in the participants assigning characteristics to the things or staff members focused on in a particular situation. Characteristics basically are something that is by definition stable. But this stability has been created through the method, in other words: an Easter egg has been found that had been hidden by the method itself earlier. The unpleasant effect now is the common association saying that things that are stable are difficult to change. And for this reason, change becomes more difficult under the analysis using traditional HR instruments. It is not difficult to see that countless acts of resistance, statements of displeasure and conflicts in companies have emerged through this conceptual misapprehension.

The following section presents alternatives that more closely resemble the important basic principles of change.

Solution-Focused Assessment

The approach used within the framework of "Solution-Focused Assessment" is a methodological alternative integrating systemic solution-focused basic attitudes into instruments. It is not a single instrument, but a different approach in devising instruments, which can relatively easily be applied to existing assessment instruments. Solution-Focused Assessment (see Lueger 2003) is based on the following principles:

1. Bateson's principle (see Bateson 1981) that information is a difference that makes a difference
2. The basic ideas of the "solution-focused approach" (de Shazer 1997), and in particular the idea that language creates reality. It is mainly two principles that are helpful for the change-friendly design of content dimensions of HR instruments:
   – Assessments are to refer to "something and not someone"
   – Terminology in assessments is to focus on categories of "interaction"

The use of these principles is to enable a focus on other realities – that take more complexity into consideration- which are more solution-oriented.

Following the first item, this approach is based on the principle of "what makes the difference regarding better/worse?" instead of determining individual values (which is enforced by traditional instruments).

What is it like?

⇩

What makes the difference?

The focus here is on the differences occurring with time as regards the relevant topics of a project, such as performance, behaviour, etc., as illustrated in the above example of a staff member, where things occasionally go worse or become really disastrous, or sometimes go better. It is exactly this difference that is seen as a potential, when the method supports the client system in finding out what the specific difference regarding "better" really is. For this, two sub-components are necessary:

– Recording and visualising the relevant differences

– Exploring the positive differences: finding and inventing (Insoo Kim Berg) of specific details regarding what is different if things go better.

Solution-Focused Assessment records these differences, by means of quantitative and also qualitative procedures reproducing the difference of better/worse. To put it simply (see figure 1): the area right and the area left of the line are shown to be an important difference and so it is symbolised that at different times it is different (after many practical applications of SFA it has turned out that it is mainly the area right of the line and thus the positive difference that is central – examples can be found at www.fit-management.at). In this way a resource- and solution-oriented view is practically engrained within the instrument, because it is signalled that there are sometimes positive developments. And this furthers confidence, as the participants see that sometimes their actions lead to positive effects.

Many a reader will now think that this may sound somewhat abstract, but how do you actually proceed?

Standardised HR instruments

With quantitative methods, scales are not (just) answered by ticking boxes, but their different natures are directly reproduced on the scale (see e.g. Lueger 2002, p.471ff.) If, for example, the performative behaviour of a staff member is assessed, the range of occurrences (e.g. between the values) is shown.

On the basis of Solution-Focused Assessment the positive difference can now be focused on. Depending on the setting, it is possible to work out, e.g. in workshops or individual conversations, what exactly is different, if something goes better. In the example mentioned regarding the performative behaviour of a staff member, possible questions might be:

- What happens specifically during the periods performance is "very good"?
- What do the top management, customers, notice when something is working very well?
- What specifically is different then?
- How do you accomplish that? What has been valuable?
- What would have to happen to make it work very well more often?
- How do you prevent bad things from happening? And many more…

Particularly helpful in this context are the techniques and principles of the "solution-focused approach" (see de Shazer 1997, deJong/Berg 2002), which in a short time creates confidence for change and specific starting points for activities. Especially the "first basic theorem" of solution-focused guidance ("If something works, do more of it") provides very useful orientation for formulating the specific questions. It makes sense to implement the principle "the clients are the experts" here, as the participants in a change project have the most detailed know-how on what is different when it works better. Working out these details also strengthens the competence perceived and facilitates the necessary identification and commitment.

Naturally, in proceeding in this manner, time and again results will be generated that refer to problems and trouble and so show worse values (if an employee/department lies within the negative area of a dimension, e.g. customer support does not work properly). It is particularly in this case where the difference-oriented approach can help by visualising the range, as problems can be discussed in a slightly less demeaning manner, if after a period of "lament" the positive difference is addressed and then worked on again. "Accusations", on the other hand, become less likely, as these are mostly based on the assignment on characteristics mentioned above, which in turn require stability (the employee is unreliable, the R&D department does not cooperate, etc.). These assignments, however, become less likely, as stabilising assignments are liquefied.

The range of depictions of differences can go from two to N items on a scale (with N being the length of the scale). This approach can, of course, also be combined with "ticking" individual values, which then represent some mean value of the range. This is helpful e.g. in personnel, when, in 360-degree evaluations a "value on the scale" is expected from the personnel department.

In companies with technical/exact corporate cultures, a variant of the approach has proved useful in which points are distributed along a scale. Here 100 points are allocated to the existing values, which in turn represent the range in the form of values. Thus the frequency of the differences occurring is depicted (for a more detailed description see Lueger 2003).

The description necessary in many change projects and the comparison of several dimensions and/or several departments/units when describing the initial situation are also facilitated through Solution-Focused Assessment. In this context, figure 2 shows the analysis of six dimensions on the topic of leadership.

Of course, in such cases, just like in the traditional approach, differences can be seen that also show less good values. In the example given, for instance, the information flow, in the view of the staff, works far better (5.7) than support from the management (3.0) By integrating the range and the differences between better/worse, it is somewhat easier to consider the "difficult" subjects – that is, not so good values – as again a signal is given that sometimes things work better. If consultants/moderators again and again put the main focus on the positive differences, regardless of the setting, in most cases much more positive dynamics are more likely.

Similarly, differences between departments/units can be visualised (if, for example, in the figure above the depiction only refers to a single aspect such as "information" and, instead on the different dimensions shown on the left hand side, departments are depicted).

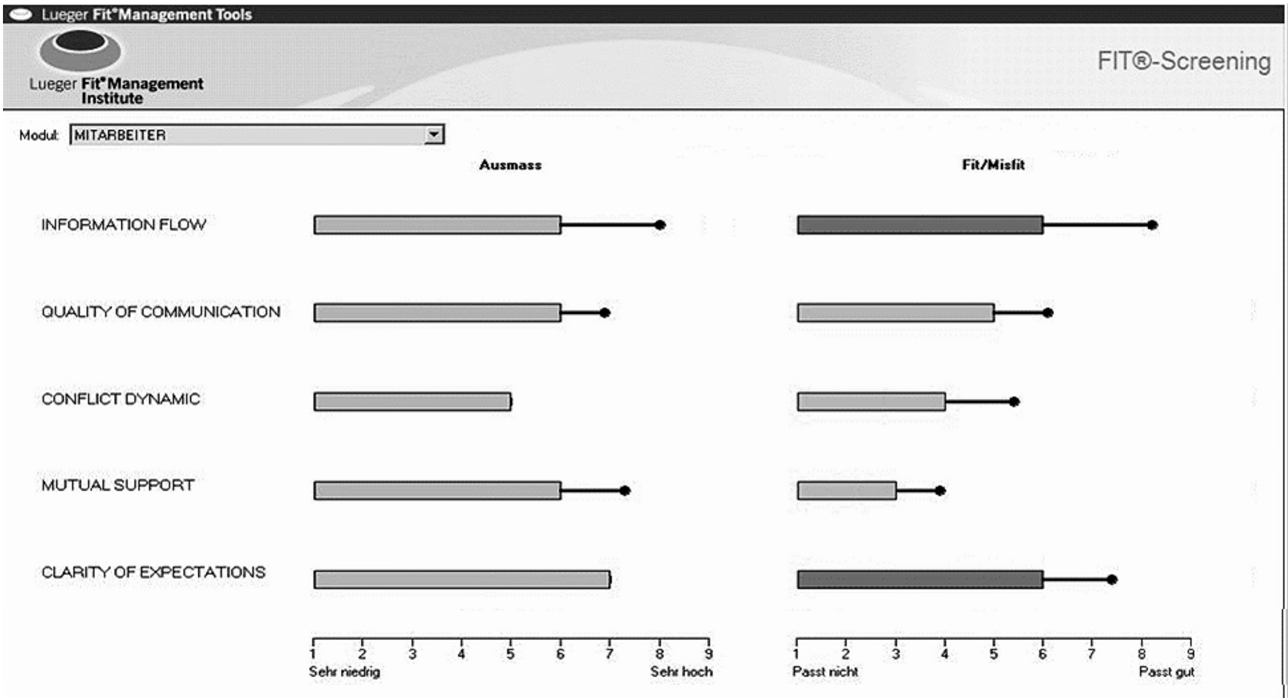

Figure 2: Difference-oriented analysis by differentiating characteristics

Assessment criteria – a different use of language

The assessment criteria show a strongly reality-determining character. Depending on what is used for criteria (customer complaints, ability to work in teams, communicative behaviour, quality…) different aspects are emphasised. In corporate practice, it can often be seen that personalising characteristics are in use. Particularly in the case of rather bad assessments the participants' resistance is much stronger.

"Solution-Focused Assessment" takes into consideration in the assessments the complexity of events by taking into account interdependencies and it also suggests formulating criteria in a language that makes them more acceptable. Here, in the development of criteria and dimensions for assessments, SFA is based on two central principles:

- Change something, not someone
- Every action is interaction and the key question is: "does it fit?"

While with classic HR instruments, for example, often criteria such as "communicative behaviour of the employee" can be found, SFA uses "information flow" as a comparable criterion. Thus the focus is not on individuals but on "something", in this case information flow. Experience has shown that, if problems should occur, this form of labelling makes it much easier to discuss them. Another example is the use of the criterion "quality of cooperation" instead of "employee's ability to work in teams". The former puts the emphasis on interaction.

It is also particularly helpful in this context to take evolutionary language patterns into account, by using terms such as "fit" or "misfits", which imply an interdependence between at least two aspects.

It can be assumed that the use of the “wrong” language as mentioned above leads to the construction of problem-centered realities in companies and makes collaboration, teamwork or the motivation of employees more difficult. On the other hand the use of a more solution-oriented language concerning criteria can have a very positive effect on important dimensions of success.

Qualitative instruments

Using the principle of Solution-Focused Assessment with qualitative procedures follows the same basic concept. When using qualitative methods it is slightly easier to focus on differences and it can be assumed that for this reason qualitative methods have become a central factor in systemic consulting. For the link to client systems it is again important to visualise the positive differences, which definitely is not the case in all qualitative approaches. If, for instance, interviews are conducted with employees on the topic of "conflicts between units A and B", or customer satisfaction is recorded in customer interviews, often statements are included in presentations on the "what it is like" (naturally from the point of view of the respective group). So, for example, on the cards or slides, qualitative statements such as "customer dissatisfaction is connected with a flawed strategic orientation" or "organisational contradictions make conflicts between A and B very likely" can be found. Taking into account positive differences (e.g. "there are fewer conflicts if method X is used in the projects") again facilitates beginning work on processes and steps in the change process.

Process-oriented assessments

Solution-Focused Assessment can also be put to good use in the analysis of weaknesses and flaws in work processes. If, for instance, weaknesses in processes are to be identified (although it would be more useful to call them potentials), the traditional approach of analysing the process steps can be kept up, though with a different focus: not where is the problem, but what makes the difference when the process runs better (e.g. certain waste is avoided), and this enables the use of a different focus.

Summary

SFA in all its forms is based on the following principles:

– Recording positive differences and taking more variety into account
– Using terminology that focuses on the "thing" and on interdependences (fit and interaction) and thus can be accepted more easily
– Making a link between "better" and "worse" by implementing the "as well as" principle in instruments
– Making a link between past and future
– Improving that confidence that change is possible, which easily creates acceptance amongst the persons concerned

The most important stimulus for constructing these now time-proven principles of SFA is probably a statement by Steve de Shazer, which is best expressed in the oft-quoted sentence: "we can know what's better without knowing what's good".

The examples listed here aim at outlining the flexibility of the principle of Solution-Focused Assessment and are not supposed to be a full description of all solution-focused instruments (different variations in different management contexts can be found in Lueger 2006b). The flexibility of Solution-Focused Assessment also makes possible the modification of existing HR instruments, which in the author's experience practically always allow for additionally taking "differences that make a difference" into account.

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Bärbel Fink

Making performance rating relevant, informative and meaningful

Keywords: performance appraisal, performance evaluation, appraisal interview, solution-focused use of rating scales, employee perspective, university setting

Abstract

When employee performance rating was introduced at Finnish universities, this was met with concern about the feasibility of such a system in an academic setting. In planning staff orientation sessions at two Finnish universities[1] , the main aim was to suggest ways in which performance appraisal could be experienced as meaningful in spite of the perceived problems of the new system. Only if the process was seen as potentially worthwhile - and respectful of the individual - did there seem to be a chance of it being approached in a constructive manner.

Building on Günter Lueger's idea (Lueger 2003) of focusing on variation in performance rather than static performance ratings, a "bottom-up" approach to performance evaluation was suggested. "Bottom-up" in two respects: (a) starting from employee self-evaluation, and (b) building up the overall rating from a discussion of the specific details of the staff member's performance. This, it was hoped, would encourage a "research-oriented" approach to appraisal and thus not only be more acceptable but also evoke a more helpful mindset.

Background

Following other parts of the state sector, performance rating was introduced in Finnish universities in 2005. After the initial trial year, all staff will receive salaries based on an evaluation of the demands of their job[2] and a performance-related component. This represents a major challenge and a big change from the prevailing culture. Various training and orientation measures were planned by universities to support the changeover, and the author's experience with providing orientation sessions in two organisations forms the basis for this paper. At the University of Oulu, the focus was on preparing supervisors for their new role. At the University of Lapland, en-

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1 The sessions described in this paper were designed and delivered together with Sisko Kärki.

2 This element of the new system will not be discussed further in this paper, although it formed part of the orientation sessions.

tire teams or units were invited together with their supervisor(s) for training sessions. In addition, there were sessions specifically for supervisors. The present paper describes some of the practices suggested in these sessions as well as the rationale for them.

Not surprisingly, there is, and has been, much concern about and opposition to the new system. Many feel that performance rating is not only inappropriate – if not counterproductive - in an academic setting but also represents a radical break with the Finnish work culture, which has traditionally been one of trust and self-obligation. On a more personal level, people are concerned that the new system will bring benefits to those who are more willing or able to tout their achievements at the expense of those who keep a low profile while diligently pursuing their tasks. There is the fear that the new system will sour workplace relations and encourage sycophancy and favouritism; although the old system with its salary tables and age increments was far from perfect, it did have the benefit, in the minds of many, of being impersonal and predictable.

In addition, there is the difficulty of appraising performance in an environment where there are frequently no agreed targets and where people work highly independently. Moreover, some of those now charged with appraising others were appointed to the role of supervisor only recently, when the need to limit the number of assessments carried out by any one person became clear. Furthermore, many among the staff and supervisors had no previous experience of annual reviews in any form, since only some departments had an established practice of regular discussions between staff and supervisors on performance and development. All in all, it was a challenging situation for everyone concerned.

What, then, could be offered in the orientation sessions that would be helpful to people? The brief was (a) to familiarize participants with the concept of regular performance reviews and their place in the management process and (b) to lay the groundwork for constructive interviews. Given these aims, and the time available (3-5 hours per group, plus optional pre-session tasks), how could we be useful to participants?

Luckily, some time before this assignment, I had come across Günther Lueger's ideas on solution-focused rating (Lueger 2003), which became a cornerstone of our work.

Solution-focused rating

Briefly, solution-focused rating means taking into account "variations in performance over the period reviewed“. This is achieved by "asking the rater to distribute 100 points across the scale“ (Lueger 2003: 37).

Example:

Criterion: Quality and results

Name: Joe/Jane Doe

1=Development required	2=Satisfactory performance	3=Good; according to expectations	4=Performance exceeding expectations	5=Outstanding performance
10	10	50	20	10

(scale as defined in the Salary System for Finnish Universities, General Staff)

Redefining the evaluation task in this way allows for a more interesting type of conversation around ratings: faced with a distribution rather than a single value, rater and ratee are invited to ask and answer questions around the perceived differences in performance and factors responsible for the difference, especially what it is that enables superior performance. In this process, alternative manners of chunking job performance (different tasks, projects, roles, customers, partners, etc.) may be examined for usefulness, which encourages a systemic perspective. What solution-focused rating achieves, in essence, is to shift the frame from top-down "control“, or "judgement“, to a collaborative, Sherlock Holmes' type of activity of teasing out the critical element(s) that help explain the perceived differences in performance. It is precisely this that makes solution-focused rating so interesting.

On a more concrete level, the perceptual shift may be described like this:

From a boring, if reassuring

Employee: X

Criterion: Quality and results

Level: Good/According to expectations (3)

to a more intriguing and thought-provoking

Employee: X

Criterion: Quality and results

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
10	10	50	20	10

to something that, some way into the appraisal talk, might look like this:

Employee: X

Criterion: Quality and results

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
10	10	40	30	10
- administrative routines ☹ (time sheets ususally late)	- poor project documentation (project E)	- customer projects delivered on time and according to specifications (projects A, B, and C) - customer satisfaction (projects A, B, C, and D)	- opening up new market opportunities (introduction of product X, new customers for service Y) - crisis mgt/ staff support (project D)	- innovative solution to problem M

(entries at the bottom are specific instances of performance at this level during the period evaluated)

It is not difficult to see how such (open-ended) detailing would provide rich and fertile ground for solution-focused, resource-oriented questioning[1]. What is more, in the process of such questioning a rating may be arrived at that is both transparent and acceptable to both parties. In cases where a global, single-value rating is required by the system, as is the case in Finnish universities and other state sector organisations, the examination of performance based on a distribution of points can serve as a valuable intermediate step. Having explored the full spectrum of an employee's performance, there is a better chance of agreement on or acceptance of the final, global value, since the facts and criteria on which it is based have been made clear.

Solution-focused rating – the supervisor's perspective

Our first project was with persons in a supervisory role at Oulu University, where orientation to performance appraisal was offered well ahead of the introduction of the new system. This was a major benefit since it allowed for a more reflective approach free from immediate pressure.

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1 For readers wishing to familiarise themselves with solution-focused questioning in the context of appraisal interviews, see for instance Graf/Zecha 2005.

According to participants, the major challenges presented by the new system are:

- fairness, or how to be "objective“
- fear of conflict and/or communication breakdown
- disappointed expectations
- time

With the exception of the time problem, solution-focused rating seems to offer support to supervisors on all of these. When the idea of using distributed values as an intermediate step towards (required) global ratings was presented in the sessions, participants seemed to find this a useful frame.

Fairness, or how to be "objective“

Fairness as an aspect of leadership behaviour and the way an organisation treats its members is a deeply held value in Finnish culture. It is especially important in the public sector and the civil service ethos. Studies conducted in municipal administrations across the country (Kivimäki et al. 2003) have shown that perceived justice in the workplace is directly related to the health and wellbeing of workers. For treatment to be perceived as "just“ or "fair“,

- decisions must be based on the most accurate information available,
- those affected by the decision must be made aware of the rationale underlying the decision,
- there must be a process for correcting faulty decisions,

to name only some of the criteria named in their study. Appraisal talks based on solution-focused rating offer a communication frame that is in line with these requirements. Paired with the idea of employee self-evaluation, described below, it shifts the focus to a collaborative search for meaning and away from absolute positions that are difficult to challenge or to modify.

Fear of conflict and/or communication breakdown

Fear of conflict and a reluctance to deal with disagreement openly are a characteristic of the Finnish communication culture. As participants pointed out, it might be tempting to give overly positive evaluations and let shortcomings go unmentioned in the hopes of avoiding open conflict or communication deadlock. There was also concern about hurting employee’s feelings with the resulting negative effects on motivation and workplace climate. The benefits of solution-focused rating in alleviating such concerns are obvious: on the one hand, distributed ratings offer a much better chance of recognising areas of superior performance, which may be mined for resources available to support required or hoped-for development. On the other, the joint examination of the distributed values lowers the threshold to discussing more difficult issues, since it is made clear that performance is never all good or all bad.

Disappointed expectations

Pay in Finnish universities is not the main reason why people work there. In fact, one of the stated reasons for the salary reform is to improve the ability of the state sector to compete for qualified personnel by providing greater pay flexibility. At the same time, there is little additional money available for increasing salaries, which means that hopes for better pay will largely be disappointed. This presents a major challenge to those charged with carrying out the performance reviews: how to maintain belief in the value of the process if superior performance cannot be rewarded financially in any significant way? While not providing a solution to this inbuilt contradiction, solution-focused rating does offer a context for quality to be recognized and appreciated. It is not unrealistic to assume that at least in some cases the experience of being "seen“ and valued for one’s qualities and effort by one’s superior may count for more than a financial reward.

Solution-focused rating – the employee’s perspective

Being evaluated on one’s performance is not a situation cherished by most people, at least in the Finnish culture. While familiar and accepted in some contexts, such as school, for many people performance evaluation as a tool of management and a determinant of pay is a disturbing concept. In addition, academic staff have traditionally been independent and used to setting their own standards. Thus, anything that helps to normalise the appraisal and places it in a context perceived as non-threatening and potentially useful would seem to increase the chances of people engaging in the process in a resourceful and meaningful way. This was the thinking that informed our choice of content for the staff orientation sessions. Creating as safe and constructive an environment as possible for the evaluation was our key concern.

The aim of creating a resourceful environment was approached from different angles:

Ensuring adequate preparation through self-assessment:

- gathering specific evidence of personal performance during the period under review
- forming a reasoned opinion as to what would constitute a fair appraisal
- becoming aware of one’s own assumptions concerning job requirements and quality standards

Creating a useful mindset/frame for the appraisal interview:

- a joint exploration to create better understanding
- a chance to fill abstract criteria with personal and local meaning
- a context for sharing and reconciling different viewpoints

Employee self-assessment

This largely mirrors what was described above for solution-focused rating but is carried out by the employee in advance of the appraisal talk. While it cannot reasonably be expected that supervisors engage in such detailed prior analysis, for individual employees the time and effort is both realistic and justified, especially when taking into account the possible benefits. Employees going into the interview with the facts and their own evaluation of facts clearly in their minds (and supervisors having received this documentation in advance) are in a much better position to use their time productively during the appraisal interview.

Moreover, there is an in-built awareness raising effect when distributed rating rather than global rating is used: having made one's estimate concerning the distribution of points across the scale, one is faced with the implicit challenge of explaining one's underlying reasoning. For example, what part of performance represents the 10 per cent classed as outstanding, and what exactly is it that makes it so? In this way, distributed ratings encourage people to reflect on, and possibly question, their implicit assumptions concerning priorities and standards of performance.

However, explaining one's perceived distribution to oneself or others by providing detail is not the only way that solution-focused rating can be used. The process can be carried out equally well *in reverse*, with individual facts gradually building up a composite picture that suggests a particular numerical distribution. In this case, the starting point is not a distribution of points; rather, individual aspects or elements of performance (chunked down to a suitable level of detail) are collected and placed at what is perceived by the individual as the appropriate level on the rating scale. Only then would the resulting data be examined with a view to assigning points. In this, weighting can be used to reflect the relative importance of different activities.

To return to our previous example, the process now starts with data collection; each item is entered at the level deemed appropriate by the individual:

- administrative routines difficult; time sheets often submitted late …	- project documentation not always up to scratch (project E) …	- projects A, B and C delivered on time and according to specification - customers satisfied on projects A, B, C, and D …	- created new market opportunities: product X introduced; new customers for service Y - managed crisis on project R successfully; kept project team functional…	- innovative solution to long-standing problem M …
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5

The data can then be analysed and weighted in order to arrive at a distribution of points on the scale.

10	10	40	30	10

If the distribution arrived at does not match the person's experience, significant questions will be raised: have relevant data been overlooked? Is weighting needed to account for the relative importance of different tasks? Does the person apply too strict (or lenient) standards when placing items at a particular level? Is personal experience distorted in some significant way? (Conversely, when starting from the distribution of points, the question is whether sufficient and relevant data can be found to support one's intuition about the appropriate distribution.)

What is described here at the level of the individual and self-assessment is mirrored in the appraisal interview, when similar questions are explored between employees and their supervisors to reconcile possible differences of view.

A useful frame

As becomes clear from the above, solution-focused evaluation at this level of detail leads quite naturally into a conversation involving different viewpoints, priorities and alternatives. For example, to start at the lower end of the scale, one might ask if this employee's weakness in administrative routines really does require development (and to what degree), or if it could in fact stay at the current level because it does not substantially interfere with performance and/or can be compensated for by others? Likewise, at the top end of the scale, it would be interesting to examine (a) what it was that was innovative about the employee's approach to problem M, (b) what enabled him or her to arrive at this solution, and (c) how this could be leveraged for other projects or areas of performance? Indeed, the range of questions that can be asked and explored is limited only by their relevance to the particular case and situation and the time available for the interview.

It is clear, then, that solution-focused (self-) assessment evokes a much more useful mindset than traditional forms of performance appraisal. In addition to identifying strengths and resources for growth, solution-focused rating holds out the hope of arriving at a more detailed, context-specific and shared understanding of abstract performance criteria such as "quality“, for which there are no concrete yardsticks (yet). Shared understanding of criteria, in turn, is necessary for evaluations to be experienced as transparent and fair.

Appropriate framing of the appraisal interview is important especially when there are differences of opinion that cannot easily be reconciled. Again, solution-focused rating would seem to offer a better chance of a resourceful response. When looking at performance in concrete detail, differences of opinion can be traced back to specifics of behaviour and context, which is more likely to lead to a genuine sharing of information and viewpoints. Differences in global evaluations, on the other hand, offer no such starting point for joint examination.

Other benefits

Although not directly related to appraisal, a potential side-benefit of a solution-focused approach to performance rating may be burnout prevention. At least in the university environment it seems that in the absence of clear job descriptions, conscientious and well-motivated people easily take on too many tasks, simply because they need to be done and there seems to be no one else to do them. A solution-focused appraisal interview provides an opportunity to review people’s task lists and/or to acknowledge the fact that maintaining a high standard in all of one’s activities is impossible given the workload. Judging by participants’ comments in our sessions, the resulting discussions about priorities and the best use of a staff member’s limited time and energy could be useful in offering relief from unrealistic expectations, while also providing focus. Indeed, when listening to people’s comments in our sessions, it became clear that for many doing a good job meant performing *all* of one’s work at a high level of quality, thus creating considerable (internal) pressure.

Conclusion

The solution-focused use of rating scales offers varied possibilities as a generative and easy-to-grasp tool in performance management and development both from the supervisor and the employee perspective. As shown above, solution-focused (self-) evaluation and solution-focused interviewing based on distributed values provide a resourceful frame for joint reflection between supervisors and employees concerning past performance, current resources and future directions. Where global (single-value) ratings are required by the system, solution-focused rating can serve as an important intermediate step towards global ratings that are perceived as transparent and, ideally, as accurate and fair, while also helping to identify routes for development. To derive the most value from solution-focused rating it would be important, however, for both supervisors and staff to have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with solution-focused thinking and lines of questioning prior to performance appraisal.

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Lina Skantze and Loraine Kennedy

How Solution Focus can improve recruiting processes

Keywords: recruitment, management, solution focus, workshop, process oriented method, metaphors

Summary

This article is based on a case where the authors worked as consultants using Solution Focus methods. The empirical parts of this paper cover the workshop facilitated by one consultant and refer to both pre and post workshop interviews. The study was carried out in an organization, 'The Resource Team', which had experienced problems with recruitment processes. The consulting process and the organization outcomes are described.

The results show how the Solution Focus method was useful for the participants, both regarding recruitments and in everyday teamwork. The consultancy intervention led to enhanced understanding of what the team already did that worked well, both when recruiting and evaluating new employees.

Post-workshop interviews showed that the managers felt things had become clearer, and that they had succeeded in putting words to previously tacit issues. This contributed to a better grasp of the situation, and created a base for a shared view within the group. Also, the group allowed themselves more time for talking and listening, taking care to better understand what others really meant when communicating.

Aim

The aim of the workshop was for the members of the organization, and for us, to gain a deeper understanding of the recruitment process. The longer term goal for the team of managers was to secure a higher degree of success when recruiting new members to the organization. For us as workshop leaders the aim was also to further explore and develop the Solution-Focused method of working.

Method

The primacy of the workshop format is that new, previously tacit, non-communicated, or forgotten knowledge is accounted for and shared. There is no previously fixed question guide, and all questions are asked in a Solution-Focused manner (De Jong & Berg 2002, Jackson & McKergow 2002). The process in this workshop relies on the workshop leader asking questions, and allowing the participants answers to direct the course of following questions, thus probing for clarifications and 'solution building material'. Probing interview questions explore words and conceptions that the team make use of. The reflective method aims to make them more concrete, exploring and establishing what they could mean in terms of actual behaviors. In short, the outline of the workshop was developed depending on the clues and possibilities that arose in the process.

This article is also written in a process oriented manner, and knowledge is accounted for as it appeared when carrying out the study. A structure where questions and answers build on one another – in the same way as they occurred in the workshop – gives the reader insight into, and understanding of the method used. We do not believe that a traditional structure would speak to the reader in an equally fruitful way.

The problem

If one types in the words "recruitment process" on Google internet search engine, there are no less than 50 200 000 hits. The vast number indicates that recruiting is no easy task, but a critical one for any organization. There are many ideas on how to achieve excellence in this field, and the success rate of any given one may be impossible to secure. Bringing new co-workers onboard is a difficult task in many ways.

The Resource Team, the focus of this case study, works with people who have acquired brain injury, and who want to get back into working life. The team works with daily activities targeted towards finding work, integrating into society, and investigation of work capacity. Their vision is: "with respect, competence and imagination create opportunity for every individual and job training to develop beyond today's bounds".

The work is challenging, demanding both strength and focus from every team member at all times. The organization was anxious to improve the process of recruiting new staff; often they got it right, but sometimes new recruits distorted the dynamics of the group as well as the result of their work. Although very competent and highly ambitious, the team felt they didn't really know what made a recruitment a success or a failure. They could not afford to make mistakes as this often had strong negative impact on their clients. Having 'tried everything' they had produced both routines and documentation around the recruitment process, some of the tools were so time consuming that they were rarely used. Introduced to the consultants they were curious to try a Solution Focus approach (De Shazer 1985).

Interviews

In this project, individual interviews were followed by a four hour workshop. There were seven participants; the company executive president and the vice president, four managers responsible for different units (which are geographically spread), and the chief of personnel. The executive president is a strong and driven entrepreneur, the vice president is her ‘right hand’, both visiting the different locations on regular basis. The chief of personnel has previously worked in a similar position in the IT sector. All were interviewed by phone prior to the workshop and afterwards, and all were present at the workshop. The interviews were carried out two weeks before and two months after the workshop

The first round of interviews took approximately one hour per person, while the follow-up interview took between 15 and 20 minutes. The workshop lasted for four hours, and was also attended by a non participating observer. Throughout the assignment extensive notes were taken.

The theme for the first round of interviews was exploration of experiences from earlier recruiting processes, and the Team’s expectations for the workshop. Questions were formed interactively, using concepts and wordings as expressed by the interviewee (De Jong & Berg 2002):

On the recruiting process

1. What needs to happen for you to feel satisfied with the recruitment process?
2. How do you know that you had recruited the right person?

On employee characteristics

3. What does an employee that ‘focuses on the client’ do?
4. How do you notice that a co-worker is ‘confident’?
5. If you walk into a room where one of your new recruits is interacting with a client, what is happening that tells you it was a successful recruitment?

On the upcoming workshop

6. What needs to happen in the workshop that makes you feel it was time well spent?
7. What else?
8. How would that make a difference?

The over all result from the interviews showed that the whole team wanted to feel safer and more convinced when they made their recruitments. The chief of personnel experienced that the rest of the team sometimes showed a lack of interest in the recruiting process, and prioritized the daily business and client-focus above preparation for, and evaluation of, recruitment. Some team members felt that routines and documentation involved in recruiting and evaluating new employees was tedious and over worked. It required a lot of effort and gave little or no perceivable outcome. The executive and vice presidents were both frustrated with the situation. All involved had a strong urge to improve success rate in recruiting.

During the initial round of interviews, a number of the important characteristics of a suitable employee were stated by the interviewees. As explained earlier, the workshop leader used probing questions to further explore the managers' words and conceptions. This process in a way deepens existing knowledge and makes it useful as it becomes more concrete, and tied to actual behaviors. The result is collated in the following table:

Characteristics	*Concrete signs and Observable behaviors*
Secure, whole, mature	Calm body movements, does not question him-/herself repeatedly, makes the client calm and at ease
Humor	Feels and shares joy with the client, includes the client and adapts jokes and stories to their situation
Calm	Can make small talk and jokes, talks in a direct way even about difficult issues
Perceptive, flexible and observant	Able to follow along when dialogue changes track, listens and are able to adopt others view
Thoughtful	Can hesitate when answering a question, don't need to be seen/noticed at all times, does not act as if in possession of all right answers, asks "Did you do this before? If so, how did you do it?"
Present	Focusing on the person they are talking to at the moment, doesn't immediately look up when someone enters the room if having a dialogue with a client
Curiosity and wanting to learn	Asks questions, doesn't jump to conclusions
Engaged	Speaks enthusiastically about clients, becomes involved in situations
Positive	Makes use of opportunity, finds new angles and perspectives on issues
Good tone	Runs a dialogue when communicating, can adapt frame of mind to clients needs (like not being too jolly or too personal, or bring personal problems to work), uses adequate words when talking to the client
Humble	Can admit to not knowing, asks for help, confess to weaknesses
Responsible	Takes own initiatives, makes suggestions, talks about work at work
Respectful	Solves tasks together with the client (not for them), sees and appreciates clients' resources, has confidence in the clients ability, doesn't 'imagine' a lot, takes colleagues and clients seriously, sees 'the person' before 'the problem'
Self-esteem	Focus on the other', can handle strange and unexpected situations (remains calm if a client has an epileptic cramp), body and mind gives the same message

Workshop

The workshop was opened by the team members introducing one another in a complimentary way by reflecting on what they thought the other person would contribute during the day. This created a 'feel good' factor early on and a sense of shared respect and valuing each others' contributions. The participants expected the workshop to help them 'find patterns of what works', 'explore connections', and clarify success factors when recruiting. Also they were expecting it to be inspiring, and to provide an opportunity to share experiences.

After the workshop leader shared a summary of the pre-workshop interviews and agreeing an agenda, the team was asked the miracle question (de Jong & Berg, 2002). The phrasing of the question was based on outcomes from interviews, where it had been revealed that the primary goal was to feel more secure when recruiting:

> *Imagine that you are gathering here again in three years time to discuss your successes. A miracle has happened; your different units are working excellently, and you feel safe and secure as you bring new employees onboard.*
>
> *Describe what you have done. What do you see and hear? How does it feel? Who is doing what? How? What is different? Anything else?*

Besides being asked the question, the participants were also given a printed version for reference. They were split into two groups with the task of drawing and/or writing their images of the future. After 15 minutes they returned to the room and presented their work to one another, explaining what they wanted to experience when meeting again in three years time.

At this point, the workshop took an interesting turn as a picture of two buoys was part of one presentation. One of the buoys was well anchored at the bottom of a sea, while the other was drifting with a short and unattached chain dragging underneath. The picture was said to illustrate members of staff that worked well – the anchored buoys – and the ones that worked out less satisfactory – the drifting buoys.

The presenters were asked clarifying questions about the different buoys, such as;

Question	*Response*
How do you know what buoy you're dealing with?	You feel safer and can focus on the client when working with an anchored buoy
In what situation does the difference between the two become clear?	When there are acute situations and crises in the workplace
What happens to the buoys in a storm?	The un-attached buoy drifts away and can be found anywhere in another sea, while you always know that the attached buoy stays within a predictable radius
Are there times when the un-attached buoy works well?	It can work well in calm waters, and perhaps in delimited territory

This image, and exercise, proved to be so powerful to the group that, when asked to scale (de Shazer 1994, Jackson & McKergow 2002) how well their expectations of the workshop had been fulfilled so far, they stated that they only wanted to rehearse and further explore what had been revealed already.

We decided to use the Reflecting Team exercise (Norman, Pidsley & Hjerth, 2005) to better understand and make use of some of the team members' previous experiences. In interviews, and at the beginning of the workshop, the team had requested to analyze their mistakes and unsuccessful recruitments in order to 'find out what they did wrong'. However, the team was asked to first explore one recruitment that had been extremely successful.

During the exercise the team learned that they needed to remain free in relation to a pre-formulated profile of potential recruitments. They also discovered that, before a face-to-face interview, they should ideally relieve themselves of impressions made by viewing documentation and having phone contacts with the person being recruited. They also came up with the idea of a new routine, 'enchantment-scrutiny', which involved a non-present team member asking the interviewers clarifying questions after meeting a job applicant. This would solve a difficulty they had discovered; namely that charming people were not always the best employees, and that it easily happened that the members present at interviews convinced one another that the job-applicant was what they were looking for, thereby 'contaminating one another with a positive biaspositiveness'. The 'enchantment-scrutiny' would be a tool for a more unbiased evaluation process.

As this first exercise came to an end, the team was asked if they wanted to explore one of their failures – the answer was a unified 'No!'. They suggested that there was plenty to learn from the successes, and it was a more fun and energizing way to work. So, another Reflecting Team exercise was carried out, exploring how they had successfully evaluated employees during their trial period.

This time the exercise resulted in the decision to clarify the bigger picture in relation to each recruitment, not to focus exclusively on the potential employee. It should be made evident what determined any decision, whether it was the qualities of the person, or situational factors in the organization such as work-overload, difficulties to cooperate in the present group, time line, reluctance to start a new recruitment process etc. The importance of separating person and function became obvious; the recruit might be a nice person *but* how are the tasks being carried out, how well does the person interact with clients and colleagues.

Another outcome was that, in case of uncertainty, the team decided to ask the questions "Can we change the conditions to suit this person better?" and "If so, how?". During this exercise, the group also elaborated further on the buoy-metaphor; was it possible to make a lake for the buoys that got lost at sea?

At the end of the workshop, scaling was used again to identify what the team was already doing right considering the results of the workshop exercises, and what the next step would be for each of the participants.

Participants evaluation

The results discussed below are based on the participants' evaluations during a follow-up interview over the phone approximately three months after the workshop. They were all individually asked what was better, and what was different from before, and what the interviews and workshop contributed?

Three of the participants took part in a recruitment process that started soon after the workshop, the vice president reported being more engaged in the recruiting process this time than before. In his view, the team members had 'moved closer together', specifically noticing a new understanding between chief of personnel and the unit managers; "A common reference was created as we put words to things in the workshop. We can go back to that. We have a common view on what a person needs to be like to take a place in our team. That made the process easier." He continues to say that "Another noticeable difference was that the three of us worked better together" and "it was possible to grab more dimensions than the absolutely concrete" even for team members that had found this to be difficult before the workshop. There is now a more clear sense and consensus regarding the needs in the different units of the organization. "Things have become much clearer. Even if it is still difficult it has helped to put words to it" says one participant when asked to evaluate the outcome. "We don't just rush by these things, but let it take time, allowing it to become major points." "We see the bigger picture now, and have a better understanding for one another. We don't just look to our own units. "

Images and metaphors are perceived to be useful, for instance when clarifying conceptions, and are more frequent in the organizational dialogue now than before. It appears that the buoy-metaphor is still used and elaborated on. One interviewee said "We had had the same problems ever since I came into this organization. Now, it is as if things are coming into place."

Some team members experienced that they got better support from one another after the workshop "You don't have to cope with everything yourself". There is a better co-ordination, especially between three of the five units. The interviewee that noticed this makes a connection to the introductory complimentary exercise in the workshop, where the participants presented one another: "It was an aha-experience! It is rare to hear what others have to say about you. We see one another more as resources now." Putting words on what is difficult has also helped to achieve this; discussions can be used to find new ways to move ahead when a problem has occurred. "One is conscious of the problems, and keen to find solutions – 'This is where we are now, what can we do about it?'". An important outcome for one of the more junior participants was that “if I as a leader feel that a person is not right, I can stand up to that even if the group thinks differently”.

Finally, a common language and a spontaneous adoption of SF ‘tools’ proved useful to the team in general, not only in the recruiting process. The structure of the workshop, and the way it was run, has inspired participants to do more of the same, for example they arranged a staff meeting in the same manner. The practice of scaling 1 to10 is now continuously used in various situations by the team members, and throughout the organization. “It’s a good way to improve the quality of discussions” one participant says. During an annual evaluation day following the workshop, scaling played a significant role in finding out what had been going well during the past year and what the next steps would be to improve the organization’s activities.

Final comment

In this case, the power and usefulness of the metaphor is striking. It leads us, to want to further elaborate and explore this specific part of solution building processes. Other obviously useful tools is the method of questions, answers and further probing questions, as is the Solution-Focused way of exploring what is already there in means of clues and building blocks for solutions.

Reflecting on the outcome of this process, it is interesting to see how effectively the team picked up on, and made use of, Solution-Focused tools such as the scaling question. It is also striking how the effects of the work we did together, even though focused on the recruiting process, spilled over to other organizational work activities. Having a common language, a shared understanding, and some suitable tools appear to have made a difference for this stunningly capable and hard working team.

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Solution Focus in Organisational Development

Wolfgang Gaiswinkler

Organisational Consulting as a Field for the Solution-Focused Approach

Keywords: organisational consulting, medical model, Solution-Focused approach, empowerment, customer - consultant relationship and interaction, action research, customer's frame of reference, "not knowing position", providing professional knowledge.

Summary

Using the Solution-Focused approach can be very useful for organisational consultants and their customers. A view on the development of approaches in the helping professions and in organisational consultancy is given. This helps us to examine the similarities and differences between these fields. Both consultancy and the helping professions are often influenced by a medical, expert-driven model. The Solution-Focused approach is an efficient and radical departure from the medical model. This helps to avoid the disadvantages of the medical model. Some aspects of the medical model do, however, have to be integrated in many organisational consulting processes. One crucial art is how to use both models in an appropriate way.

From our systemic point of view (Fürstenau 1992) organisational consultants do not want to change the individuals they have contact with. They want to change organisations. This is the reason why they are contracted.

Therefore, when we are hired for organisational consultation we consider the organisation as our client and not the individual persons working for it.

This "European" systemic point of view stresses the importance of focusing more on interaction than on individuals. Niklas Luhmann for instance, says organisations do not consist of people; they consist of communications (Kommunikationen).

Obviously, since it is not possible to hug and kiss organisations, if you want to get in contact with an organisation, you have to work with its personnel. (cp. Fürstenau 1992, Luhmann 1984) The organisation as a social system can only be reached via its representatives - and only via communication.

Although the intention of organisational consultants is to change the organisation which is their client, they still need to be highly skilled and competent in working with groups and individuals ("personale Systeme" says Fürstenau 1992 following Luhmann).

As a consequence organisational consultants with a so-called "systemic background" work with organisations on the one hand by conducting interactions between representatives of the organisation and themselves (i.e. in conversation with the clients) and on the other hand by talking about past and future interactions within the client's field.

The Solution-Focused approach is one of the most elaborate, providing the necessary skills to have productive conversations with clients. These skills include: using breaks; using clients' words in order to work within the client's frame of reference; various useful questions to determine the client's desired outcome – especially the miracle question, questions about exceptions, scaling questions, using silence, giving compliments etc. About skills and tools you can, for example, learn from De Jong and Berg 1998 and Sparrer 2002. [1]

And the Solution-Focused approach suggests a particular attitude which is very beneficial for clients and consultants alike.

I suggest we take a short look at the historical development of approaches in the helping professions. By comparing these approaches, the differences to, and the specific features of the Solution-Focused approach will become clear. After this we will have a look at different approaches to organisational consultancy. There are interesting parallels between the development of the approaches in the helping professions and in organisational consultancy.

Models in the helping professions and the contribution of the Solution-Focused approach

The traditional or medical approach to therapy is expert-driven. The expert assesses the problem, makes a diagnosis and then prescribes treatment. After the treatment he or she evaluates the outcome. Specific to this model is the assumption that the expert has to find out the cause of the problem (or of the suffering). In psychotherapy and in some traditions of social work which are influenced by psychotherapy, the focus is on finding an underlying cause in the past. This is done by raising why-questions.

In the traditional medical model the focus is generally on the client, on his or her problem and often on the roots of this problem in the past. The expert focuses on the problem and perhaps also on the client, but does not examine the interaction between him or herself and the client. He or she prescribes the client the fitting solution to the problem.

Then a paradigm shift took place: systemic practitioners discovered that it is not necessary to uncover the past roots of a problem in order to solve it. They developed the assumption that problems are something which must be maintained in order to remain

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[1] Jackson and McKergow 2002 provide an adaptation of SF-tools for work with organisations

intact. For this reason, they moved the focus from the question: “what is the cause of the problem?” to the question: “what maintains the problem?” (De Shazer 1998: 74)

When the therapist discovers how a problem is maintained, he or she can develop strategies to irritate (or disturb) the patterns of behaviour, the attitudes or assumptions which make up this maintenance.

The Milanese tradition of systemic family therapy has the basic assumption that a problem is maintained by fundamental family rules. Another well known tradition - the group in the Mental Research Institute MRI in Palo Alto (Weakland, Fish, Watzlawick) – assumes that a problem is maintained by the clients effort to solve the problem. (De Shazer 1998: 76)

In both of these systemic traditions the focus is on the present. The therapists have basic assumptions about what maintains the problem in each specific case. As a consequence he or she tries to disturb the patterns which maintain the problem. This is often done by setting paradox tasks (interventions).

In the beginning, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, who founded the Brief Family Therapy Center - BFTC in Milwaukee, worked using the approach of the Palo Alto group at the MRI.

Then they discovered that it is not even necessary to analyse what maintains a problem: by observing and analysing sessions with clients they came to the conclusion that there is not necessarily a connection between a problem and its solution. They were able to realize this by doing research in a highly accurate, but at the same time non-academic and very inductive way.

This discovery made the therapy more efficient and productive for the clients. In one seminar Steve de Shazer said with a smile: “John Weakland needs on average seven sessions and we need on average three.”

Steve de Shazer from BFTC and John Weakland from Palo Alto group at MRI nevertheless cultivated their friendship until John Weakland’s death. They met each other from time to time to work together and discuss cases.

The Solution-Focused approach developed by Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer and the team on the BFTC is a method which is no longer expert-driven. The clients’ goals drive the activities. The therapist supports the client in developing goals – for example by asking the miracle question. [1] Client and therapist work together in a very collaborative way. They also build solutions by looking for exceptions. Exceptions are times and situations which are or were at least a little bit like the client’s desired outcome. The therapist encourages the client to do more of what works.

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[1] Sparrer 2002: An interesting comparison between the NLP concept of goals und the different SF concept of “the clients desired outcome” of the therapy

In the theory of social work and counselling there has been a debate for many years about empowerment and about focussing on clients' resources and not on their deficits. But knowledge of how to put this into practice in the work with clients is less developed.

Steve de Shazer's and Insoo Kim Berg's contribution has been to show how therapists/counsellors can have conversations with clients which focus clearly on their, the clients, strengths. They do this by supporting their clients in building solutions and by giving them, the clients, credit for success.

The development of organisational consulting

Organisational consultants who want to give their clients technical or professional advice work in the frame of the medical model. They analyse what the problem is and they tell the clients what to do. If, for example, the consultant is an expert in business administration, he or she can give the clients advice on this topic.

Certainly this kind of consultancy can make sense in many cases. One problem in this tradition is, however, that the client is in a dependent relationship to the expert. It is most unlikely that this dependency is decreased by the process of consultation. But often dependency is not a problem or there is no appropriate way to avoid it.

Another problem is that sometimes the general solution given by the expert does not really fit perfectly to the situation of the organisation which has sought consultancy.

A third possible problem is that, despite being given good advice, the client chooses, in one way or another, not to follow this "good advice". In the medical field this phenomenon is called the "problem of compliance". And certainly we can see this problem in organisational consultancy too.

Experts who give consultancy within this tradition of the medical model hold clear concepts about how a good company should work. However in many cases they have no clear concepts about what is going on in the relationship between themselves and their clients and about the process of consultation.

One source of a different approach in organisational consultancy is the work of Kurt Lewin and his followers. They invented in the forties and fifties of the past century the concepts of Group Dynamics and Action Research as methods of applied behavioural sciences, re-education and planned change. These inventions were adapted to work with Organisations and subsequently called Organisational Development (OD) (French and Bell 1994, Gunz 1986). Organisational consultants who are influenced by Lewins approach see themselves as "change agents".

Put simply, Lewin showed us, through his Action Research concept, ways of doing research which empower people (who are the focus of this research) to participate in it. He also used this principle for group dynamics in his "laboratory method": people who want to learn something about groups and the behaviour of people in groups, attend a T-Group seminar [1] in which they together, as a group, do research into this group. And he also used the Action Research concept for OD, the goal of which is to change organisations for the better by empowering the members of the organisation to participate in its development.

In the late seventies some of the OD consultants began to shift their theory and practice by dealing with the theories of Niklas Luhmann and by trying to learn from the practice of family therapists. They successfully used and adapted the experiences and skills of the above mentioned Milanese and Palo Alto traditions. (Königswieser and Exner 1999, Königswieser and Hillebrand 2005, Timel 1998, Wimmer 1992)

In the last years we have seen a lot of fruitful trials using the Solution-Focused approach not only in therapy, coaching and counselling of families and individuals but also in work with larger systems like organisations and communities. (e.g.: Jackson and McKergow 2002, Vogt Hillmann et al 2000, Roessler and Gaiswinkler 2004; an adaptation to the field of community development: Hummelbrunner et al 2000).

The SF approach fits in many aspects very well to the European systemic view of organisational consulting. Despite this, use of the approach in the context of organisational consulting is still, in my view, in its early stages. There are not many organisational consultants in Europe who use the full potential of the Solution-Focused approach.

This could be for various reasons. To mention one: the approach seems to be so (or even too) simple. Steve de Shazer used to say: “It’s simple but not easy!” You need a lot of practice to learn to converse in a manner, which is so far removed from our everyday style of communication. It is not, however, very difficult to start to integrate tools and other elements of this approach step by step into the way you usually work.

Another reason may be that the Solution-Focused approach shows us how to work with clients in a very radical and very efficient way by departing from the expert-driven medical model. But in organisational consulting we need aspects of the medical model as well. The challenge is how to integrate these aspects whilst avoiding the disadvantages of the medical model and saving the advantages of the SF model. [2]

What aspects of the medical model can make sense for organisational consultants? If you work with organisations you need knowledge about your customers, about different kinds of organisations, in relation to size, business they are in, legal aspects of organisations, different kinds of ownership, management theories and much more. This knowledge is at least useful as an aid to working within your customer’s frame

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[1] T-Group stands for Training-Group

[2] on the differences and integration of a “not knowing position” and a position of giving instruction q.v.: Giesecke and Rappe Giesecke 1997

of reference. To contract and design organisational consultancy projects you need additional knowledge and skills in project management.

The consultant needs, on the one hand, skills and competence in conducting the interaction with clients. On the other hand he or she needs expert knowledge too. Together with the clients – we should rather say the customers - he or she has to decide in what situation it would be useful to work in an SF style adopting a "position of not knowing" and when it is time to change position and provide professional knowledge to the customers. This change of position may take place several times during a short session. Or the shift can be planned in the architecture and design of a larger consultancy process: doing interviews in a Solution Focussed style may alternate with providing training or informational inputs.

One difference to the medical model should, I think, remain: the consultant who is influenced by the SF approach is able to perceive herself or himself, the customer, and the future of the customer as parts of one system. (cp. de Shazer 1998.) Contrary to this, the expert in the traditional medical model seems to stand outside the system and observe the client and his problem from an apparently objective point of view.

To use the full potential of the Solution-Focused approach for organisational consulting it makes sense to analyse the interactions and processes in consulting sessions in order to find out what works. Often the discussion about methods takes place on a conceptual and ideological level which is out of touch with what is actually going on in the contact with customers.

If we want to have definite progress in the field of organisational consulting we should use an inductive approach for observation, research and further development. Like Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer and the team on the BFTC we should look at concrete cases, analyse videotapes and ask our customers to find out what kind of questions, interventions and arrangements are really helpful to them.

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Andrea Graf

“5 to 1”: Systemic Solution-focused Change Management

Keywords: Transformational change, merger, the logic of solution-focused consulting, contract verification and platform building in complex consulting projects, systemic consulting architecture, solution-focused interview guidelines and designs

Introduction

In this paper, a change management-project is described which took place in the context of a merger. It provides an overview of the whole project but mainly focuses on the description of the primary intervention. The latter was clarifying the contract and building a solution-focused social platform on which a complex consulting process was set up. Furthermore, it shows solution-focused interview guidelines as well as an example of a solution-focused workshop design.

“5 to 1”: Initial Situation

Merge 5 units to 1: Accompanied by this ambitious claim and by a clear vision of what ought to be attained by the project, we started the change project “5 to 1” in July 2005. The project was initiated to support the management crew and the employees of five different business units in mastering the final and most difficult phase of a merger.

In the merger, a number of subsidiaries and sub-units of five different IT companies owned by a large Austrian bank were to be merged. Spread across the entire territory of Austria, the units were responsible for providing their respective regions with mainly hardware-related IT services.

So, why was a merger intended?

A couple of international IT companies had offered the owner a number of attractive outsourcing deals. By taking over the bank’s IT subsidiaries, the IT services of the bank could be provided, according to the bidders, at a lower price. In order to prevent the sale of the subsidiaries, it was necessary to find an attractive *in-house* solution that was to be accompanied by a massive cost reduction.

However, optimizing the costs required deep cuts (Moeller / Heitger 2005, p. 453). Among the measures to be taken were merging and stronger centralizing the five mentioned subsidiaries and sub-units (in the following, “the five units”), optimizing the processes and structures, reducing the staff, streamlining the product portfolio, changing the management cultures, and finding a name for the newly-founded company.

For the five units, this clearly represented a *radical change*: The merger brought about changes not only in the structures but also in the processes, tasks, and self-images of the previously distinct units. On the other hand, succeeding with an in-house solution equally stood for remaining largely autonomous, retaining the acquired IT know-how in-house, and saving existing jobs.

In July 2005, after the new organizational chart as well as the new functional structure had been agreed and the responsibilities had been redistributed, a change management project was initiated the aims of which were formulated by the merger's steering group as follows:

When the new Austrian-wide company starts operations on January 1, 2006, the following targets ought to be achieved:

Target 1:

> The core identity of the new management team has been defined: A new corporate vision including a derived set of leadership principles and guidelines has been mutually developed and agreed.

Target 2:

> A climate of openness has been established among the designated managing directors: Controversial issues are discussed and resolved before January 1, 2006.

Target 3**:**

> Teams in the new structure are "ready to go“, know their tasks and goals and are motivated to work towards them

Target 4:

> Two surveys are conducted to get to know the attitudes and emotions concerning the change.

Apart from these clearly defined targets, the pre-project situation was characterized by the extensive differences in the cultures of the units, in their working routines, the customer segments they served, and in the regional conditions under which they worked.

As for the climate, we were facing the typical, in the meantime well-known, emotional phenomena associated with the phases of a merger. Such phases are often characterized by individual interpretations of the events, uncertainty, disorientation (and a respective search for orientation), and worries about the future. These often take turns with some kind of euphoric mood, a notion of creating and shaping new opportunities, and a good deal of curiosity about new tasks and responsibilities (Lohmer 2005, p. 176). Good news is on a par with bad news. Everybody involved is concerned with worrying about the own position, digesting unfamiliar and, therefore, irritating experiences, and handling the messy vacuum between "this is no longer the company it used to be" and "this is not yet the company it ought to be".

For the consulting team, the challenge was not only to design a consulting process that would support the defined goals, take into account the huge differences and handle the emotions that were expected to run high during the merger phase.

More than this, we aimed at developing an innovative consulting-process design in which the resource orientation and the solution orientation inherent in the systemic consulting approach would be sharp-pointed by giving the solution focus special emphasis in all interventions.

Excursus "The Logic of Solution-focused Consulting"

In our understanding the process of solution-focused consulting contains 5 steps:

Step 1: Contact and contract

In every consulting process this step is a very important one, metaphorically speaking "the course is set" for the upcoming consulting process .

In the solution-focused literature, the most commonly used terms for this phase are "problem description" (De Jong / Berg 2002, p.17), "platform building" (McKergow 2002) and "synchronization" (Bamberger 2005, p. 51). In this step a basic orientation is established at three levels. It is necessary to clarify the topics to be discussed, to clarify the aims of the process and the further proceedings, and to build a customer-consultant relationship.

The special solution-focused element in this step is represented by *consciously abstaining from analyzing the problem*: First, no past-oriented analysis of *the problem's history and it´s causes* (problem-oriented approach) and secondly, no present-oriented analysis of *the patterns through which the problem keeps arising* (systemic approach).

While with the classical systemic consulting approach both sides are highlighted - the patterns through which the problem is reproduced in the present as well as the potential solutions, resources, and exceptions - the systemic solution-focused approach is characterized by the *exclusivness*, the *intensity* with which the attention is constantly called in the direction of the solution. Letting the customer describe the status quo is solely aimed at verifying the topics to be discussed and setting the context: What is the status quo? What is described as a problem by the customer? How is it a problem?

From the consultant's point of view, a rough image and a basic understanding of how the current situation is experienced by the customer should emerge from passing through this step. *No claim whatsoever is made by the consultant to understand in which ways and why the situation has developed and occurred in the current context* (risk of problem hypnosis and attribution of blame; the problem and the solution co-exist independently).

The customer has to be sure that the consultant obtained a basic understanding of the problem. After that the process will, *usually rather quickly*, be taken to the next stage: The focus is shifted onto the desired target state.

Step 2: Developing an image of the solution / target state

In my understanding this step is one of the key elements of any solution-focused work. By means of a cognitive experiment, a hypothesized question – the miracle question or a hypothesized question adapted to the context - is posed: "Suppose, the problem has been solved, does no longer exist. Suppose, that everything has just developed the way you always wanted it to be …" The customer is invited to theoretically remove the problem so that his / her pictured solution of an attractive target state can evolve. The customer has the chance to feel and experience (cognitively and emotionally) the solution here and now, in the present. In other words, the customer virtually gets to live the solution: He develops a sense of how the solution-state looks *and* feels. This experience acts as a catalyst that *disconnects* the customer *from the problem* and *strongly draws* his or her *attention towards the goal*.

After the image of the solution has been well anchored, the knowledge about the solution has been basically built, and the desire, the longing for attaining the solution state has been strongly awakened, the focus of the customer is directed again at facing the present state.

Step 3: Determining the status quo, mobilizing resources, and identifying exceptions

By means of a scaling question the problem now is re-introduced:

On a scale between 0 and 10 (0 stands for the problem in its worst form; 10 stands for the image of the solution), at which stage would the discussed problem be located? What does the chosen number mean to the customer? What makes the difference to 0? How could this be managed?

Apart from determining the current state of the problem, the consultant and the customer mutually search for exceptions from the current problem state. Focusing on the history of the customer, they deal with such questions as, "When has it been better? What was different? How could this be managed?"

By working on these questions, the customer becomes aware that the problem is not always and unchangeably just there and varies in its intensity . He or she becomes more conscious of the fact that parts of the pictured solution may already exist here at present.

In this phase, the customer often regains a more holistic view: He perceives not only the problematic of any given situation but also all the things that *do* work well despite the problem. With this kind of questioning the problem perception of the customer can be put into perspective and differentiated. It becomes clear that the customer is already basically equipped with what it takes to solve the problem. By realizing that starting from scratch is not necessary, the customer has already remarkably enlarged his or her options. The energy required for taking action and finding a solution is mobilized. The development of the action and solution-energy in step 2 and 3 can also be described as "the decisive and scientifically provable influence of focusing the attention on the neuro-physiological processes and, accordingly, on one's creative-thinking potential." The feelings and the energy state involved can be accurately described as "*energy flows where attention goes*" (Schmidt, 2004). By whatever someone's attention is attracted, corresponding physiologies, thoughts, and emotions will materialize. (Comp. Schmidt 2004, p. 51)

Step 4: Elaborating a different description of the situation and defining mile-stone targets

Based on step 3, another cognitive experiment serves as a means to introduce a new differentiation: "Suppose, you are one grade higher at the scale (for example, 7 instead of 6). What's different about being at 7? What has changed? How do you notice it?" By describing this state, the customer constructs a new status quo and sort of defines a mile-stone target for him / her. The step to be made by the customer is small enough to appear to be realizable. At the same time, it is important enough that it makes a real difference for the customer towards *"It is getting better!"*

Step 5: Establishing solutions by acting towards the pictured solution and target state

This is the first time in the process that taking action and doing something is discussed with the customer. The following question is put at this point in the process: In which ways can this new status be attained? What could support the customer in the process? Which ideas does the customer have? Which ideas/proposals made by the consultant might support the customer? At this point, the operational level of the solution-finding process is discussed and concrete activities and tasks are agreed upon.

The benefit of solution-focused consulting for the customer

Instead of analyzing problems in the context of and with a focus on their histories, which could easily paralyze the customer by fixing his or her gaze on the problem and by re-activating the problem-related feelings of the customer entrapping him or her in questions of blame, a process is initiated to activate the knowledge of the customer about finding a solution and the energy to put it into practice.

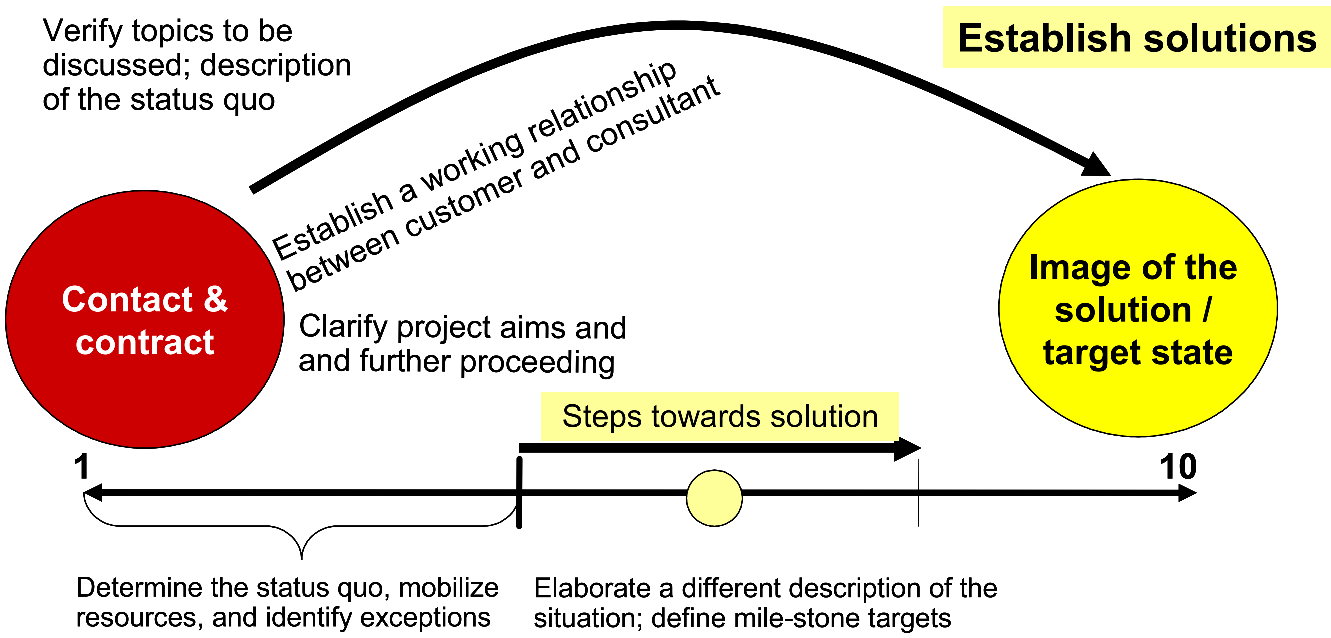

Figure 1: The logic of solution-focused consulting.

Project-specific Application of the Solution-focused Logic

"5 to 1": Contact and Contract

So, the exiting question at the beginning was: "How to start?" How - referring to the given initial situation (defined targets, the huge differences of the 5 units, high emotions, work with a complex social system and so called >mandated< clients) – to build a solution-focused platform on which a complex consulting process could be set up?

In other words: How to translate the solution-focused logic into the design of the primary intervention and furthermore into the whole project architecture?

At this point, a question often discussed in the solution-focused literature had to be answered:

How quick can we turn towards the new target state? How big or small a *problem description* would be necessary before taking the step towards developing the image of the solution? Metaphorically speaking "To what extent do I have to familiarize myself with the prevailing situation in Vienna (the status quo), my real target being Munich (the merged, successful company)?"(Lueger, 2005).

The following 2 basic assumptions guided the consulting staff's actions:

- For building a social platform as a basis to work successfully with this complex social system, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the status quo and of the planned further proceedings, shared by both the client system and the consultant system.

-Assuming that due to the situation, getting in contact with the system would require gentle and careful action, we decided to give a lot of attention to the factor of how the status quo was experienced by the people concerned.

So we decided to conduct extensive one-on-one interviews with the managing directors, selected managers, with parts of the project steering group and certain key players of all five units.

Primary Intervention: Some Basic Thoughts on the Conduction of Individual Interviews

The individual interviews allowed us to simultaneously work at three levels:

1.Platform building on an extensive basis

The interviews provided enough room for the individual descriptions of how the status quo was experienced by the people and were therefore an excellent instrument for establishing the customer-consultant relationship on a broad basis.

Each of our interviews followed the logic of the solution-focused approach. Consequently, we didn't do any analysis of the problems brought up in the interviews. But we very respectfully listened to the descriptions of the status quo, to the feelings of the people.

Interview guideline: Step 1: Description of the Status Quo

We wanted to know: How is the change currently experienced in the system? What does the change cause? Which hopes are there regarding opportunities arising from the change? Which risks are seen?

- How do you currently experience the merger?
- Which opportunities and hopes do you associate with the change? Which threats and fears?
- How do you see or experience your employees in dealing with the change?
- In your opinion, how do your customers see or experience the process?
- In your opinion, how do the four other units involved see or experience this process?

2. Encouraging people

Along with conducting the one-on-one interviews, the persons interviewed should run through the described phases of a solution-focused process so that they could get a deeper feeling of their own and the companies resources, strengths and future chances.

Based on the description of the status quo, we immediately concentrated on the desired target state:

Interview guideline Step 2: Developing a positive vision

- Suppose that … despite all the fears and risks and the worries, skepticism and concerns you are having at the moment. Suppose that the merger has worked out well for you and everybody involved, … suppose, that your company has become very successful, …
- Or: Suppose that your hopes become reality, that the merger is very successful ….
- What's different? How will you notice?
- How will your employees notice?
- How will your customers notice?
- How will the other four units notice?

Doing so, people became more conscious of the already existing images of the attractive target state which, moreover, could be enriched and extended.

By asking customer-related questions the internal focus should be shifted and redirected to customer needs.

In the next steps, we focused on the resources and the confidence in success: On which resources can we build? What makes us believe that we can make this change?

Interview guideline Steps 3 and 4: Resources and confidence in success, major steps

- On a scale from 0 to 10, how confident are you right now that this merger will turn out to be successful?
- What makes you believe that?
- What does the number you chose stand for? And what else? What else? What else?
- Suppose you would be a little more confident, for example, giving yourself 7 points instead of the initial 6. What would this number stand for?
- Suppose you could be even more confident, for example, giving yourself now an 8 instead of a 7. What would this number mean to you?
- What are your two to three most important concluding recommendations on making the merger a success?

Through repetitiously posing questions such as, "Suppose your confidence that this merger will turn out to be successful, would be one point higher on the scale,……." additional information regarding the expectable key requirements and the critical success factors in the project could be collected from a solution perspective.

3. Gaining information for designing the consulting process

As a result of the interviews we got a clear picture of the threats, opportunities, risks, success factors and resources perceived by the interviewees:

This way the consultants obtained the necessary system knowledge in order to design a tailored project architecture which was based on *theoretical insight* about the customer situation. Being able to give reasons for choosing specific measures to be applied at a special point in time provided a sense of safety and orientation not only to our customer (management board and project steering group) but also to the consultants.

Taking solution-focused action

Starting with the initial goals and the critical success factors that had been identified, the following steps and interventions were planned:

Target 1:

The core identity of the new management team has been defined: A new corporate vision including a derived set of leadership principles and guidelines has been mutually developed and agreed.

→ One workshop dealt with: *Management dialogue and mission development*
→ A second workshop concentrated on: *Our leadership principles*

Target 2:

A climate of openness has been established among the designated managing directors: Controversial issues are discussed and resolved before January 1, 2006.

→ Regular meetings of the managing directors were held and supported by an external facilitator.

Target 3**:**

Teams in the new structure are "ready to go“, know their tasks and goals and are motivated to work towards them

→ A series of business-process-workshops regarding the new core processes was held with the new teams
→ A big event titled as “Let’s start” was organized

Target 4:

Two surveys are conducted to get to know the attitudes and emotions concerning the change.

→ In the course of an Austrian-wide tour, road shows with the managing directors were organized in all branches
→ Based on a questionnaire, two company-wide employee surveys including all employees were conducted; the first was conducted after the merger had been announced in August 2005 and the second was conducted in spring 2006 with the aim of evaluating the integration process.

As a result, the following overall project architecture was developed that, at first sight, looks identical to a classical systemic project architecture.

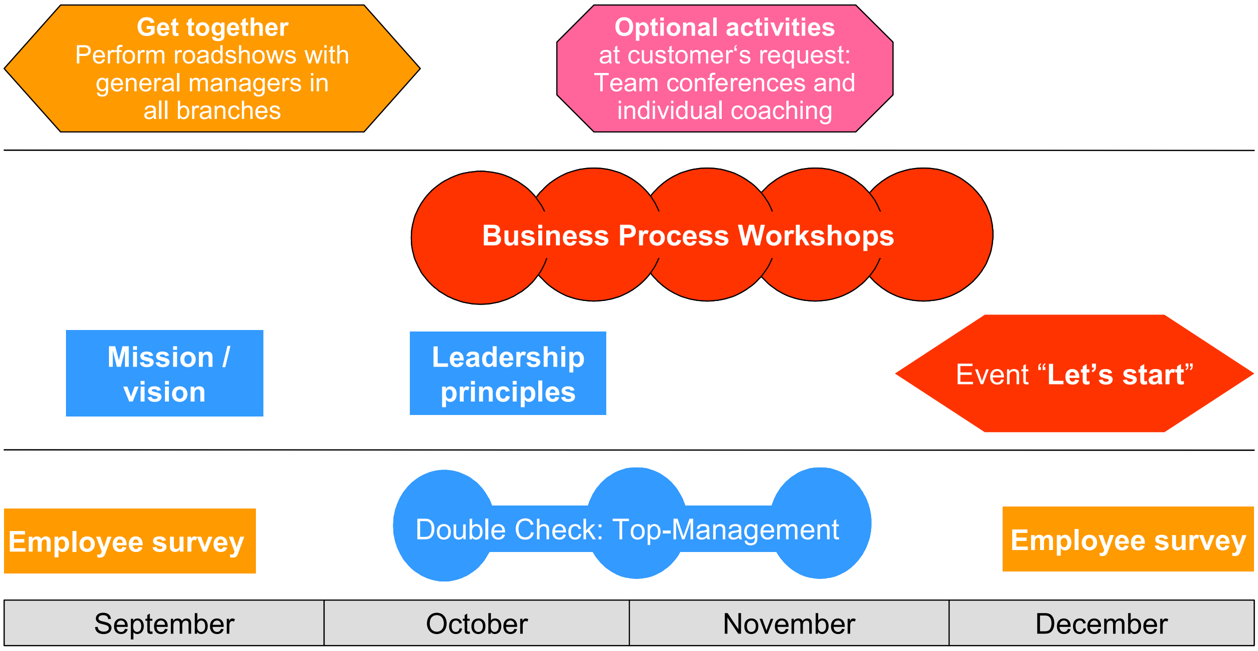

Figure 2: The "5 to 1" project architecture.

We presented and discussed the results of the interviews and the project architecture with the steering group. We established a shared understanding of the consulting process by the customer (managing board and project steering group) and the consultant system. On this basis we successfully closed the contract.

After that, the consulting process started on a broad basis in putting into practice the different moduls of the project-architecture.

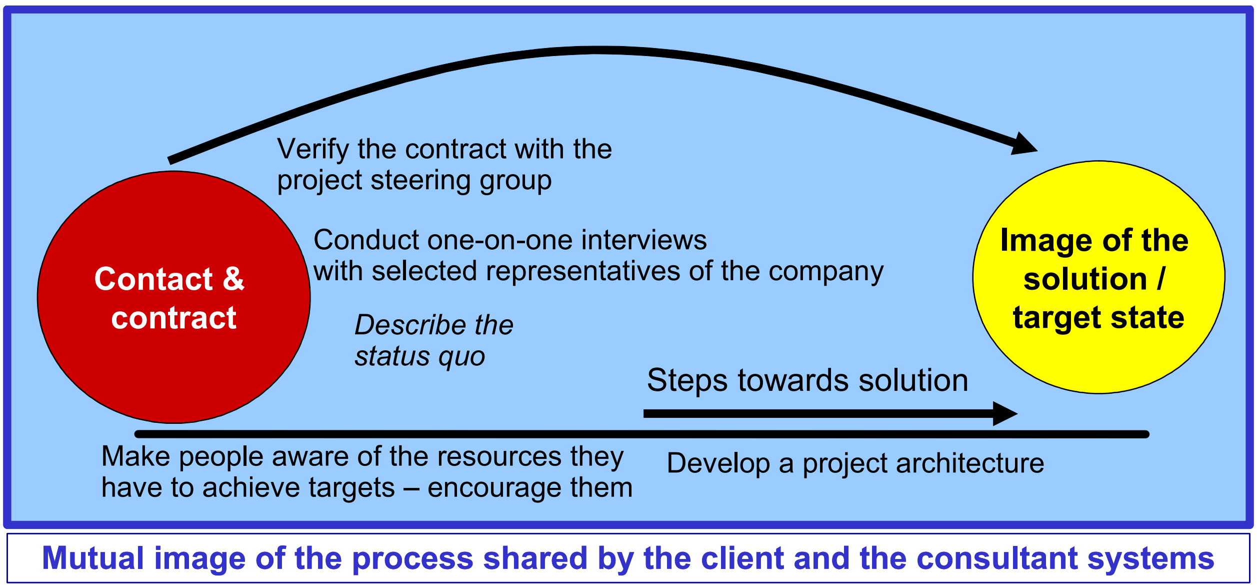

Figure 3: Some thoughts on planning the primary intervention

Our aim was to develop an innovative consulting-process design in which the resource orientation and the *solution orientation* inherent to the systemic consulting approach would be sharp-pointed by giving the *solution focus* special emphasis in all interventions. At first sight the project-architecture seems identical to a classical systemic project architecture. Also it is neither new nor unusual to start a complex consulting process with interviews. In our experience the systemic *solution-focused approach* differs from the classical approach in the details, in how we did it: Applying the solution-focused logic to the one-on-one interviews we consciously used "to gain information and getting in contact with the system" to make the interviewees aware of the *systems chances and the resources*: that way we sort of energized the system.

Further more the systemic *solution-focused* approach served as *the masterplan* for designing every single project module.

Example of a Solution-focused Workshop Design

Workshop: Management Dialogue and Mission Development

With the workshop "Management Dialogue and Mission Development" of two days duration, the stage was set for a historically unique event in the process of the merger: For the first time, the management board came together with the complete, recently designated management crew of the new company.

The aims of this workshop were:

- Developing a shared sense of direction, getting to know each other, meeting each other in an atmosphere of mutual appreciation with a focus on designing a common vision
- Market orientation and customer orientation: Developing a stronger orientation towards and concentration on the market and the customers' needs
- Developing a new and shared identity
- Conjointly formulating a common mission

Shared sense of direction, getting to know each other

At the beginning of the workshop, the big picture (the vision of a well-working integrated company) was presented by the management board: What would the target state look like; what was the project status; which steps were planned in order to achieve the set objectives? This big picture acted similar to the polar star on the horizon; it generated a sense of direction and outlined the common path for the future.

To enable the attendees to experience a sense of mutual appreciation as quickly as possible, they were invited to take part in an Appreciative Inquiry Process in the next phase. By doing so the participants were provided with an opportunity to make each other's acquaintance, celebrate the particularities, resources, and successes of each of the five units, exchange their views on how a successful company would look, become aware of their already existing resources for mastering the change and concentrate on those aspects that would best support a smooth process of shared change.

Conducting an Appreciative-Inquiry Interview: Stimulating Questions

- For how long have you been with the company?
- What about your company do you particularly appreciate?
  What makes the company special?
- If you think back to …: Is there a particular experience or situation that comes to your mind in which you felt exceptionally inspired, energized, or vital? What happened at that time? Who was involved? What was your contribution?
  Please tell me the whole story.
- If you think of the merged company now, what would you definitely like to preserve from your old company?
- In your opinion, what makes a lively and successful company?
  What do you think are the two to three most important factors?
- Is there any story from your professional background about a change that worked particularly well for you? What happened at that time? How did you achieve your goals? In which way have you developed and what have you learned from the experience?
- In your opinion, on which aspects will we have to focus the strongest if we want this mutual change to become a success?

Market orientation and customer orientation

In order to facilitate a stronger market orientation and customer orientation in the sense of re-directing the strong internal focus of the five units that had been dominating the pre-merger and merger phases, selected customers of each of the five units were invited to the workshop for half a day. The invited customers represented a micro-cosmos of the units' customer landscape: Satisfied, critical, and potential customers were all available at the workshop. Their specific feedback served as a stimulating accelerator in the change process.

Customer Feedback: Stimulating Questions

- When you think of IT services in general, what do you think will be major trends and requirements in the future?
- In your opinion, what implications does this have on IT service providers? Which expectations can be derived?
- What makes your current IT supplier … a particularly good one? In which areas are you especially satisfied with your supplier?

- If you think of the merger of the five units and the emerging Austrian-wide company, which opportunities or advantages do you see for yourself as a customer of this company?
  In addition to these opportunities and advantages, which risks do you see? Is there anything that, from your perspective, has to be avoided at all cost? Can you think of anything that would make you as a customer regretful?
- What are the three most important recommendations you would give to the company with regard to shaping a successful future?

The customer feedback was elaborated by the attendees and preserved for the next day.

Identity and mission

The second day of the workshop was begun with the miracle question and a creative session that was aimed at developing a shared vision. Different groups played various future scenarios and the spirit of the new company became much more manifest.

Due to the preceding steps (presentation of the big picture, appreciative communication, stakeholder stimuli, playful presentation of the future), the workshop participants were able to formulate a shared, energized, and engaging mission.

Workshop: „Mission Development“

1. Day	2. Day
Vision - Big Picture **getting to know each other/focus on designing a common vision:** **➔ Appreciative-Inquiry Interviews**	**Developing a new and shared identity** **➔ Miracle question and playful presentation of the future**
Lunch	**Lunch**
Developing a stronger market – and customer orientation **➔ sf stakeholder impulses**	**formulating a common mission** **➔ Formulation in working-groups along the dimensions of the mission statement**

Figure 4: Example of a Solution-focused Workshop Design:

Conclusion

What has been attained with applying the solution-focused approach as a specific variety of the systemic consulting approach?

- Appreciation as a key success factor

By choosing the solution-focused consulting approach, the participants' problem-orientation was minimized and the five units' strengths, resources, and successes became visible. In doing so**,** *one of the most critical success factors in mergers* was properly taken into account: Sufficient room was provided for mutually appreciating previous achievements and the resulting status quo.

The appreciative way in which the new colleagues met gave everybody a feeling of security and mutual trust. Furthermore, it made people feel like sharing the future, and an energizing atmosphere of departure emerged.

- Market orientation as a key success factor

By focusing on the future a positively profound counterbalance to the units' inside orientation and their concentrating on the own organization could be established (Moeller / Heitger 2005, p. 455). The attention was redirected towards the successful completion of customer assignments. In short, the customer as well as the development of external solution strategies gained in importance.
In the preparation phase for the workshop "Mission development" the participants were afraid of being openly criticized in the workshop. This fear (publicly receiving negative feedback) could be successfully dispelled by posing solution-focused questions to the customers. In fact, this made possible the decision that the customers could be involved in the mission dialogue. This gave the safety that the customer feedback would act as a positively stimulating force in the process.

The intense and immediate customer feedback also contributed to breaking the strong internal focus of the units involved that had been so dominant in the merger phase. The generation of solutions was fostered and the acting people's options were enlarged not by means of exclusively concentrating on the own resources but by also considering the additional information received from external observers.

- Mobilizing energy for action

The energy necessary to find solutions and to take action was activated and supported by designing all interventions in such a way as to laying the focus on the already inherently existing resources and images of the solution.

Outlook

The newly-founded company successfully started its operations on January 1st, 2006. Since then, customized activities and interventions for evaluating and further supporting the process have taken place on a regular basis.

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The project “5 to 1” was conducted by the external consultants Mag. phil. Andrea Graf osb-i, Dr. Bernhard Krusche osb-i and the internal consultant Ruth Spitzer, sITsolutions.

Christine Kuch

Initiating Organisational Development

Keywords: organisational development, organisational innovation, health care organisations, change tool

Summary

Though change in Western European health care organisations is needed to meet fast-changing requirements, a lot of innovations fail to be implemented. For instance, studies show that shared decision making (SDM), which aims to help patients and doctors to share in medical treatment decision making, though effective in explanatory trials, shows unsatisfying implementation in clinical practice. Since experience in the field of organisational development could help to ameliorate this situation, the goal of the present study was to design useful strategies to facilitate the implementation of SDM by learning from the field of OD. The fifteen resulting strategies are derived through a three-step development process from interviews with doctors, solution-focused and/or systemic OD experts and again doctors and other stakeholders in the German health care system. These strategies, which are presented in this article, are not only helpful to implement SDM, but also to start other change processes in health care / service organisations. The appliance of the developed "strategies of implementation" as a tool to support the implementation of new techniques and to start OD processes is also presented.

Background

Health care organisations in Germany, and in other Western European countries, are under extensive pressure to change, or, in other words, are highly experienced in change processes. Unfortunately, great experience in change processes doesn't necessarily result in successful change - the literature shows a lot of failing projects (a. o. Beer et al. 1990; Whittaker 1999). In fact, the implementation of new procedures, new techniques or other innovations is said to be especially difficult. To quote a manager of a large hospital: "We are very good in starting a change project, but after the start nothing happens.". Therefore, some authors note the relevance for health care organisations to learn from the field of organisational development (OD) (Koeck 1998, Garside 1998, Pfaff 2003). The reason for the development of useful strategies of implementation, which are presented in this paper, was the interest in successful implementation of shared decision making (SDM) in health care organisations. SDM interventions aim to help patients and doctors to share in decision-making between different treatment options. Though these interventions have been found to be effective in explanatory trials, their effectiveness in clinical practice shows unsatisfying implementation. The needed organisational change didn't take place. The question was, how organisational change can be started in a way that increases the probability of change after the start. Thus, the present development has been undertaken to design useful strategies to facilitate the implementation of SDM in German health care organisations, by learning from the field of OD. Meanwhile, the resulting strategies of implementation have also been applied in other change processes.

Useful strategies of implementation: The development

There are several ways to design useful strategies to implement an innovation in health care organisations. One is, as mentioned above, to design strategies deductively from a given theory of OD and aim, as, for example, Garside (1998), to "make theories of organisational change practical for users in health care organisations". One of the advantages of this approach is the backing by a given view of the world. In other words: "there's nothing as practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1935). Another approach is to do a literature review about the existing evidence, which has been done in a remarkable extensive way by Greenhalgh and colleagues. They accomplished a literature review of the question "How can we spread and sustain innovation in health service delivery and organisation?" (Greenhalgh et al. 2004). The main advantage here is the possibility to learn from others' experiences.

The chosen approach here was to ask the participants. The development of the present strategies is based on empirical experience of doctors, OD experts and stakeholders in the health care system. Thus, these strategies are developed inductively on the basis of practical experiences, though the practical experience of the participating OD experts is based, according to them, on a solution-focused approach and on systemic theory. One goal of the chosen method was that doctors and other stakeholders in the health care system, who usually are not in contact with organisational change literature, also actually construct their own theory about how organisational change could be managed, which is probably more adoptable within the system (see Weick 1979: 60ff).

The resulting strategies of implementation have been developed in a three-step interview study. At first, two focus groups and three face-to-face interviews with thirteen health professionals were carried out: After explaining the concept of SDM, the participants were asked what in their opinion would be helpful to implement SDM in their daily routine. In a second step, three focus groups and six face-to-face interviews were held with twenty people which had at least seven years experience in organisational development: After presenting the results of the first step, the participants were asked about useful strategies to implement SDM from an OD perspective. The third step comprised interviews with nine health professionals practicing SDM and eight health politicians from government, health insurances and health care organisation alliances after submitting the results of the previous interviews to evaluate these results and to add useful strategies from their point of view. The resulting strategies are described below.

Development of useful strategies of implementation: The result

The different strategies are briefly presented in the following. It has to be underlined, that the different strategies have equal priority – there might be some strategies which suit one situation better than others or there might be a situation where only one of the strategies is of interest. Additionally, there might be a situation, where other, additional strategies, which didn't derived from this study, might be suitable.

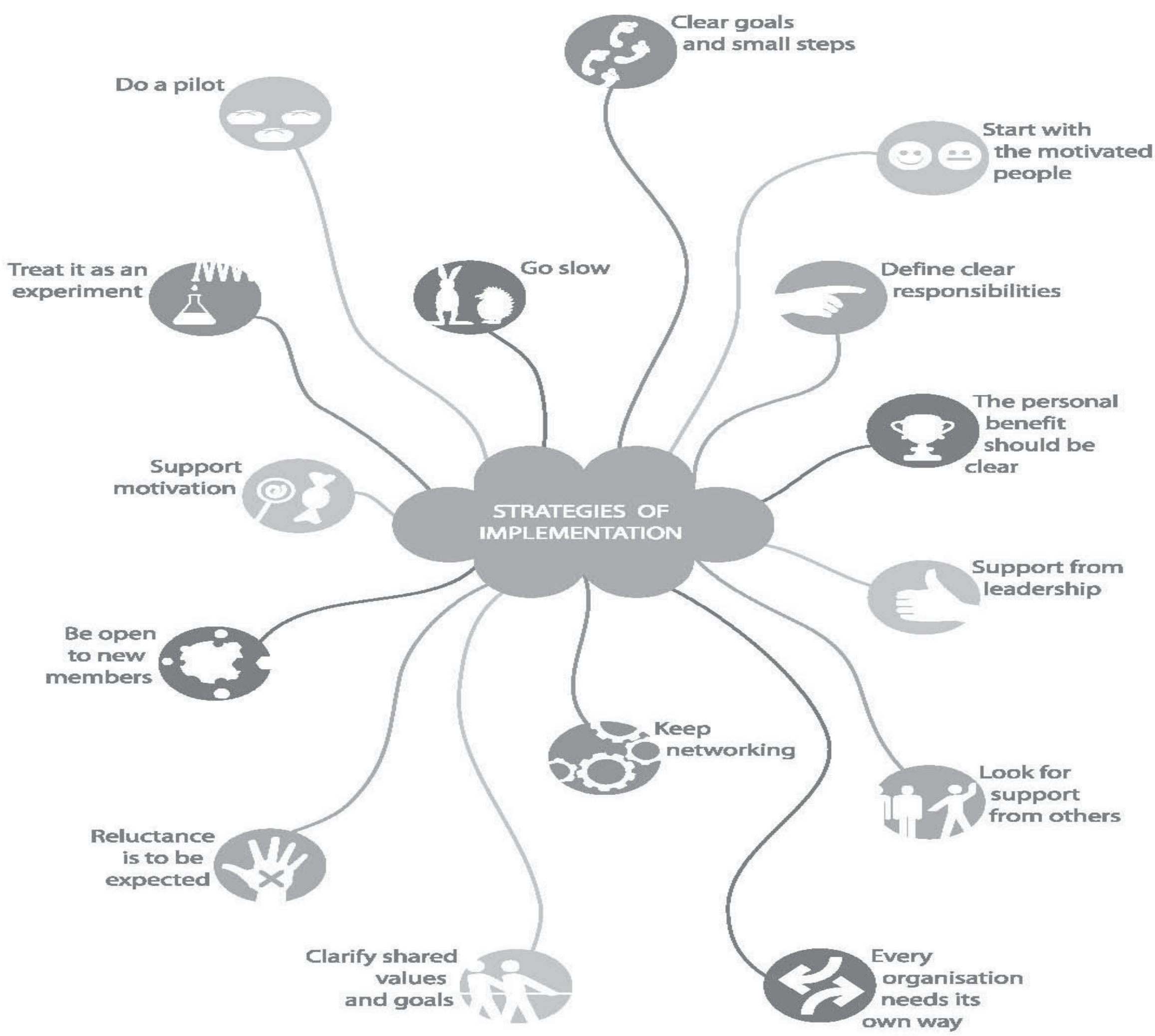

Figure 1. Strategies of implementation innovation in health care / service organisations

Do a pilot

A pilot should be done by motivated people, that takes into account what‘s already there, looks for what's already functioning and just asks for little changes to the desired direction. Its pilot character should be communicated within the organisation and to the participants to assure that unusual things can be tried out. A lot of PR should be done so that everybody knows that the pilot is done and it should be open to input from and critique by others. Last but not least an evaluation should always be done and its results should always be communicated.

Go slow

People, who want to implement innovation, should keep in mind that things grow organically and that change needs and takes time. One shouldn't expect too much at once.

Clear goals & small steps

Clear goals and possible success should be defined and the needed and available resource should be clarified. Once started, take small steps, evaluate efforts and spread success stories and don't forget tiny changes either.

Start with the motivated people

As a basic principle change should never be imposed. The focus should be on the motivated people, their commitment should be estimated. For an organisation-wide start, look for motivated key personalities from different departments and professions, start a pilot with them - and see what happens. If you don't see the possibility or the necessity for an organisation-wide start, just start with something small, which motivated people can take responsibility for within the organisation.

Define clear responsibilities

Responsibility should be clarified from the beginning, last but not least since communication is easier when everybody knows who is responsible for what.

The personal benefit should be clear

Since human beings are driven ultimately by their motives, the personal benefit should be clear for those who are intending to adopt it. Without a clear benefit, the intended adopters will say: "Well, that's a nice idea, but I don‘t need it.“. The benefit should be defined. Ask the intended adopters about their goals and their interests and if the innovation may help them in this issue somehow.

Support from leadership

If it's your idea and not one of your leaders', present the idea with a strategy on how your innovation can easily be adopted. After an agreed period the results reached so far should be presented, since practical success convinces leaders more than plans. Keep in your mind: Leaders don't have to be enthusiastic from the beginning, but they should approve the plan.

Look for support from others

If possible, integrate the innovation in medical and other health care professionals' education (Universities, legislator, medical associations). Assess the concrete needs of the patients (doctors, relatives, etc.) and check if the innovation helps them. Look for (additional) financing by medical associations, patient organisations, health insurances and by public authorities. Look also for unusual cooperation partners, e.g. medical industry: what could be their benefit from the innovation?

Every organisation needs its own way

Because every organisation is different, an individual implementation strategy must be developed. Helpful questions in this context are: What were helpful strategies in the past? What worked? Try them again! It is also valuable to clarify the process (or processes) which are affected by the innovation. Then the process can be sensibly changed.

Keep networking

Networking expands the chance of successful implementation. Therefore, support networks of those who participate in the process which should be changed. Possible are, for example, cooperation with patient organisations, networks between hospitals and resident doctors and use of new reform models of the German Ministry of health which support networking.

Clarify shared values and goals

The innovation can only be implemented if it fits the values. Since the values of hospitals and other health care organisations are still often not explicitly defined, they should be clarified. Since values can‘t be imposed, they should be defined together with leaders and employees. Values and goals can be developed by the top team and then adjusted throughout the organisation or can be first developed within the single professional groups and then put together.

Reluctance is to be expected

An innovation should never be imposed, since there are always good reasons for reluctance. It's worth clarifying the reasons for reluctance and looking for possible input from the critics to enhance the quality of the innovation and its implementation process. If one wants to convince people, it should be kept in mind that success and benefit convince people, not pressure.

Be open to new members

Never do it as a "closed shop", be open to new participants. It's helpful to use the language of the involved, not of the innovation. Additionally, ownership of the concerned persons in implementing the innovation should be supported. There should be options of choice within the application of the innovation, for example. Search actively for attachments to existing features of the organisation and use networks. To support networks, communicate openly in every direction.

Support motivation

To support motivation, especially after the start, appreciate even very little steps of progress and success. The implemention of the solutions of the involved is helpful: What has already worked concerning the process in question? What can be easily added "to do more of" the innovation in focus?

Treat it as an experiment

Implementation of innovation should be treated as an experiment. It's easier to do many small experiments and learn a lot than to wait for the "perfect" occasion: "small and beautiful" instead of "perfect and never".

A tool to support organisational change

The presented strategies of intervention have been successfully used as a tool for people who aim to start organisational change. For this purpose, the strategies aren't orally presented altogether. In fact, every participant of a change process gets the chance to actually pick up the strategy (or strategies) which, according to him, is (or are) of special interest in the given situation. It's also possible that a participant creates a new strategy which, according to him, is missing. Thus, the tool itself is flexible and open to change. The appliance of the tool by internal or external consultants or coaches is shortly presented here:

Step 1: What's in focus?

Before applying the tool, you should make sure that you got an order or contract to support a group of people who wants to start a project or to improve a situation or to prepare other changes within the organisation and who think or hope that they can do something about this change themselves. Additionally, a relationship between you and your customer should be established, which enables your customer to trust you and the process you propose, respectively. Therefore it is helpful to listen to your customers carefully and to ask about their situation, so you can feedback your understanding of their given situation and their general goals. This process is nicely presented by Jackson and McKergow (2002) as "building the platform".

After you and your client have established this sustainable relationship, the first step is to ask the group to formulate their common goal, e.g. improve the rate of publication, getting more positive feedback from their patients etc. It's also possible to use the tool with a group of people with different goals, but then the question will be different, e.g. "Please, think about a present or future change project you would like to start within your organisation!".

After the focus is clarified, you lead the group to a place in the room (or even better in another room), where the strategies are displayed. To use this strategy tool, each picture of every strategy is printed out with the title of the strategy and the fifteen sheets are placed in a circle on the room's floor. In the centre of the circle the group's goal is presented.

Step 2: "Strategy Walking"

This step comprises three phases, which can be repeated:

In the first phase "Walking" you ask everybody to look for a strategy which he or she likes (because they have had good experiences with it; because it reminds them of something, what might work in this special situation", etc.). After one (or one and a half) minute, this phase stops and everybody should go to a strategy he likes most (so far).

During the next phase "Talking and Writing" the people who choose the same strategy or those who stand near each other, form little groups of two or three people. Ask them to talk about the question: "What can I/we do next with regard to this strategy?" and ask them, to write their idea(s) on card(s) and to place it next to the strategy which it belongs to. This phase should take two (and a half) minutes.

During the third phase "Getting support" ask the members of each group to talk about the following question: "What does your neighbour like about your idea(s) and about you?". This phase should take two (and a half) minutes.

After this, you ask the group to repeat the three phases, and you ask them to add their favourite strategy if missing: "If you miss your favourite strategy: Just add it.". If it seems to be useful, the phases can be repeated once more, but it’s important not to repeat them too often.

Step 3: Deciding about the next steps

To prepare this last step, the pictures and the cards of the group are displayed on a pin board. After appreciating the result, you ask the group if everybody should do what he likes to do or if an agreed procedure is necessary.

If it’s the first case, after choosing “their” strategies, the participants concretise the meaning of the strategy with respect to their own interest. Everybody should think about the question: “Is there any concrete tiny little next step, you are willing to do next to reach …?” and decide on his or her own, which concrete little action he or she likes to do. Subsequently, if the group is not too big, everybody tells what he or she wants to do and till when this will happen. This process is not only supporting commitment, additionally the participants can get the positive feeling that a lot is done to reach the goal, and a lot of opportunities for appreciation emerge.

If an agreed procedure is necessary (according to the groups’ thinking), a group discussion can be facilitated by reflecting the group‘s mind-map. Questions like “Is anything missing?”, “Is there something that should be done first?” etc. can be helpful to support the discussion. Here again, after choosing the current important strategies, small, concrete actions deriving from this strategies will be defined. They should be easily accomplished within the next days or weeks. After appreciating the groups’ result, a second meeting should be arranged, to reflect the process which has taken place so far and to arrange the next steps. A second meeting should also be arranged if it is just a very small project, to give opportunity to reflect and feedback (What worked well? What should be done again? etc.) and to appreciate the efforts of the participating people.

Conclusion

The strategies of implementation, which are based on an inductive interview-study with professionals in the German health care system and with people who work in the field of Solution-Focused and/or systemic organisational development, have been judged as useful by people who work in the field of SDM and by people who want to start change processes in health care / service organisations for other purposes than implementation of SDM. The resulting tool, which is itself open to change, provides help to start and support change in health care / service organisations.

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Shradha Tibrewal & Pamela Marques

Management's Role in Building SF-Programs

Keywords: Solution-Focused management, child welfare, domestic violence

Summary

Based on interviews with administrators in three agencies that provide services for children and families in the United States, we will discuss their experiences with building Solution-Focused programs (SF) in their agencies. We will address their considerations with contractors, regulators, financiers, and the community when promoting SF programs, and what they do with their internal staff when conceptualizing and implementing a solution-focused program and provide recommendations for agencies that want to implement solution-focused programs.

Context for Solution-Focused Work in Child Welfare

Child Protective Services (CPS) in the United States seems to be under constant fire and criticism by the community, the media, and other social service systems for doing an inadequate job of protecting children. However, we know that protecting children and trying to keep families together is a difficult job. Additionally, this is trying to be accomplished with agencies that are often understaffed, under trained, and under funded. As Insoo Berg highlights in the following quote,

What I have found are overwhelmed, overworked, and unfortunately some unappreciated workers, supervisors, administrators, and managers all trying to do the best they can with the poor and vulnerable families in our society. The culture of this work is unique and generally unknown to the rest of child welfare (Berg & Kelly, 2000, p.13).

We also know that the child welfare system is rooted in the problem-solving model and shifting from that perspective to a strength-based solution-focused approach in this climate and culture is understandably tough. In our experience there are workers and administrators who are committed to this work and struggle with implementing this practice as a reality in their agencies. Knowing what we do about child welfare services (CWS) and organizational change, we were curious about how these administrators are able to implement a Solution-Focused approach in their organizations. We are hopeful the following interviews we had with administrators will help other organizations pursue this heroic effort.

Overview of Sample

We have been working with two counties in the Central Valley region of California to implement SF programs. Both the counties have a long history of being politically, socially, and fiscally conservative. For confidentiality reasons, we will refer to the Counties as County A and County B. However, one of the counties (County A) is experiencing change because of the influx of people moving in from the more liberal Bay area. Public child welfare in this county has been more progressive in its practices and more willing to use strengths based approaches with families.. We interviewed five professionals who are managers and directors of public and private social service agencies within these counties. One agency (Agency B)is a public child welfare organization and the remaining two are community based not-for-profit agencies that contract with county child welfare services. The two agencies are very different; one of the agencies (Agency A) has 300 employees and has been in the community for 35 years; the other agency (Agency C) has about 10 employees and has been operating for the past five years or so. Agency A is predominantly comprised of White middle-class well educated employees; the smaller agency is headed by an African American woman and the employees are very ethnically diverse and are para-professionals.

To capture the diversity in each of the agency's experiences and for us to learn from them, we are first telling each agency's story about their experiences with implementing Solution-Focused programs. These stories will highlight their experiences with funding sources, their regulating/contracting bodies, the community at-large and their internal staff.

Agency A

This agency contracts with county CPS to provide programs and their newest venture is a foster care program. We worked with this agency to transform their family reunification parenting class curriculum and individual counselling sessions for these families into a Solution-Focused approach.

External Funding and Contracting Bodies

The director at this agency shared that the funding source's response to using a solution focused approach depends on the program and the state and legal mandates associated with it. For example, a domestic violence group as per California legislation has to be 52 weeks and typically follows the Duluth model making it harder to implement a shorter term Solution-Focused model. Whereas, currently, the state of California is undergoing a redesign of the child welfare system, that promotes strengths-based and family driven programs. She emphasized, "if you tell them how SF fits with what they are trying to do, like in the case of the parenting class you (we) connected SF to the CWS redesign and with their goals. It was an easy sell because of that."

The politics of the mandates play a role in the approval of such programs. Some programs are considered "sacred cows" and domestic violence programs are one example of that. "Meaning that people feel very strong convictions about how the program should be offered. Any suggestion to alter it or to provide something different is questioned and even may be considered a threat." Another obstacle is just inertia in terms of changing legislation– the time it takes to do that and to get community support for a different way to offer the program.

This director strongly believes that one can overcome these obstacles through several means including strategy, awareness of the current legislation and community trends, and especially the fit with the agency values.

> You try to get a sense of where the fit is philosophically. Concentrate on the positives. Maintain a good product (service). Find the fit and the money to support it. Even though I'm the clinical director, most of my work is developing new programs and finding the money to support them. You gotta know the trends and sometimes go beyond the trends if you have a good product that is supported by a university and/or research. This is influenced by the leadership. You need to be strategic, to meet court mandates, and to address local issues.

She added, "You got to keep your eye on legislation don't ever think it won't effect you. You don't want to be got unaware. That has happened to me and it was a big lesson to learn. I don't like tracking legislation but I do now!"

Community-at-Large

The director emphasized the need to stay connected with the community. She and the executive Director attend a lot of meetings to stay on top of the trends and what the community wants. However, their organization also questions whether the trends fit with the agency's values and try to pay attention to that. She further provides an example of this experience, "Back in the 1970s we offered the first social learning model to parenting. Mental health was using a medical model for these classes even though they had no measures about its effectiveness. Everyone assumed that was the most credible way to improve parenting skills because it was the medical model. For some time we were criticized for not offering a "real" parenting program because it wasn't condoned by mental health. Our social learning model had been researched for its effectiveness and we were using measures. Well, overtime (1980s) the opinions changed in this area and we became a leader in this area. If the product is sound, and research based people want what's best for people. It takes a lot of creativity, flexibility."

Internal Staff

An important aspect highlighted by this director was the need to engage and involve the staff in the decision making process regarding these changes. They have learnt from their experience of not doing so. She shared, “In the case of the DV group, we didn’t do our homework especially with the staff. We just decided to do it without running it by them. That caused some internal problems which probably would have come out at another time.” This wasn’t helped by the fact that DV is one the ”sacred cows” in general and only made matters worse. Personality differences also contributed to the mix.

She also describes an ideal way to implement a solution-focused program.

> You involve them. That wasn’t difficult with the parenting program because most of the staff were already on board. I am the most proud of that program because the way it was planned and implemented was perfect. It is a good model to follow. All of the staff were invited to participate in the curriculum. They had a part in it. Then you (we) provided training and when the class started there was supervision to support staff.

When asked what works, she responded, “we need to be aware of the time it takes for people to change. Staff get set on how to do things and we need to do a better job of supporting them to consider another way.” She adds that it’s good to involve staff at all levels. It is necessary to bring up topics for discussion and to introduce ideas in a conversational way and also “give them tasks, resources, training.”

Agency B

Agency B is a county child welfare organization located in a rural community that is experiencing many changes. Families from the Bay Area that are seeking more affordable housing are fuelling many of these changes. We have been working with the organization to test pilot a solutionfocused domestic violence group for women and men.

External Funding and Contracting Bodies

According to the administrators, the big issue with external funding is whether the new program fits the criteria of existing policies that have been in place for years. The organization often gets caught up in doing rule-driven social work; however, their goal is to do family-driven social work. These state and local policies restrict the organization in what new programs they can develop. Funding sources do not have a problem with the money. As the director pointed out, “Its when we ask for more money. Funding is an issue for us when we want extra money that is beyond our annual allocation” she added.

> They (state of California) are not planning for strength based work. If it takes more resources to do strength based work, then we have to do it on our own resources. So, we when we do find money it comes so late in the year it is hard to plan effectively. An allocation in September would be better than it being special money that comes in later in the contract year. This is one of the obstacles. They aren't planning for a strength-based service. If it takes more supportive services to do strength-based practice there is no additional money for it. It is new for the state, the new money for special projects. If it becomes part of the allocation and bureaucracy procedure must be put into place to allocate the money. That takes time.

To overcome these obstacles these administrators are very creative, flexible, and they play to the strengths and needs of the people who fiscally monitor their organization. To do this they show respect, understand the auditor's job, and build a credible relationship in such a way that auditors are willing to manoeuvre the system to get around obstacles.

The Community-at-Large

Like most rural communities in California, the community in which Agency B is located is very conservative. The prevailing philosophy is that people should be able to take care of themselves and their families–to take personal responsibility. Providing help to people through social services can be seen has a way to undermine personal responsibility. Consequently, the administrators at this agency are continually engaged in educating the community-at-large about what might happen if these services were not provided. They put it this way,

> They don't want to pay for social services. The drug culture is significant here especially methamphetamine. You got to educate them about what it will cost them if the services weren't provided. We infuse more money into the economy than any other business. All the aid we give–the people spend that money in the community. Its about the money. Were it not for public services what would the community look like? We are going on the investment in an impoverished area. There is little philanthropy.

Internal Staff

Agency B is in the midst of an organizational and cultural change. Rather than doing what they call rule-driven social work they are moving towards family-driven social work. This change is causing stress and discomfort among the supervisors and those that work directly with families. At times, staff feel like they don't know what they are doing. They want direction and a sense of comfort. The organization's 15 supervisors play a key role in supporting and directing staff to make this transition in philosophy and practice.

One of the administrators said,

> It takes excellent management to do it differently to push staff to go beyond their comfort zones. No one wants to feel like they don't know what they're doing. Its incumbent on management to say this is reality. This is how we are doing things. We try to get them to see strength based work is in the best interest of the child and family. And, that will make their job easier in the long run.

Another challenge for these administrators is that they are trying to change everything at one time. Yet, not all of their supervisors know how to do strength based work with families. Of their 15 supervisors, the administrators believe that about 3 to 5 are able to model strength based practice. Another 6-7 are some where in the middle of getting it and the remaining number are still doing rule-driven social work.

Agency C

External Funding and Contracting Bodies

This agency is a private not-for-profit agency headed by an African American woman. With regard to external funding sources, she shared that she uses a "non scientific approach." She believes in the power of personal stories to obtain fiscal support. For example, she relates the story of "Gigi" who came to the agency 7 months pregnant with "messy hair." The agency staff treated her with respect and empathy. Subsequently, the child was removed by child protective services. "Gigi" and her significant other came together for services and almost got into a fight while waiting in the waiting area. Now "Gigi" has graduated from the program. And they are advocates of the program. The director feels that the clients "sell the program."

Other struggles include the fact that funders are not counselors and therefore, "at times it is hard to put in words the change you see in people." "They just don't get it." She further identified the need to be articulate in words in order to effectively express "how people have changed and show your excitement and passion on paper." Also her ethnicity, while being beneficial at times, has also served as a hindrance. She says, "They don't expect anything intelligent to come out of my mouth. When it does, they look shocked."

She emphasized the need for credibility in overcoming these obstacles. Since starting this agency, she has created a credible network of contacts. When people meet her they know she will get the job done and "get it done right." Her past experience with managing an agency in a perilous state and with a $17 million budget has also established a reputation of her in the community. She emphasized the importance of this in such a small community especially where African Americans only make up 3% of the population. Therefore, she has a very "distinct" presence at meetings in the community. Even the politics in this small region has gone in her favor in certain ways. The director, overall, believes that, "cultivating a relationship with the person who is responsible for the program and holds the purse strings" is very important. "They should know you are capable of doing the job."

The Community-at-Large

This director's experience has been that, "they [the community] don't understand strengths based approach." Her take is that this is a small community with a severe methamphetamine problem. When people are sober and overcome their addictions, there is not much to do in the community making it harder for them to stay sober or clean. Additionally, the community looks down at people with an addiction, which further adds to their hopelessness and low self-esteem. It is a vicious cycle.

Internal Staff

Interestingly, the director shared that her hiring practices make a difference. She selects people who are "putty" and "can be molded." But she adds that all her staff likes solution-focused work so she has not met with any resistance from staff in using this approach. She also educates the staff by telling them, "its not about us, its about the clients. When you sit down to do the group, give 100% to the group. Demonstrate to clients they are respected." Additionally, she strives for an ethnically diverse staff. She believes that clients expect to see practitioners with whom they can identify. Agency C is one of the only minority owned and operated agencies in the county,

Recommendations: Community-at-Large

- Stay connected to the community by attending meetings and understanding the local politics.

Recommendations: Funding/Regulating Bodies

- Pay attention to the legislative trends and ask how the new program is a fit between with what the community is interested in.
- Be creative, flexible and don't give up. Be persistent and educate them about how they can do things differently and still stay within the guidelines and mandates.
- Make the connection to money/dollars for funding agencies–show how it benefits them.
- Involve researchers and trainers in marketing the approach to funding/regulating bodies to provide credibility with research data. There seems to

be a need to bring in outsider objectivity or a neutral position that is not invested in the local or state politics.

- Cultivate and build a relationship with these bodies that provides you with credibility.
- Respect them, understand they are just doing their job, and value their position; they will be more willing to work with you.
- Be articulate and show your passion on paper as well as verbally for the change you see in people with using a Solution-Focused approach.
- Along with research data, tell stories of people you have worked with- it adds a human touch and makes it more real.

Recommendations: Internal Staff

- Involve and engage them in the decision making process from the inception of the idea to its implementation.
- Educate them and increase their awareness of this approach especially that it is in the best interest of the child and the family.
- Demonstrate that using a solution-focused approach actually makes it easier to work with families in the long run.
- Supervision plays a key role; try to role model what you want them to do with clients. Tap into the workers' strengths and their expertise during supervision.
- Give them time, training and support to change.

Summary

In addition to the recommendations, we found that the directors and managers themselves played a pivotal role in making these changes happen. Their own positive attitude, commitment, energy, and strengths based approach goes a long way in getting all the stakeholders on board.

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Organisational Learning and Culture

Susanne Burgstaller

Designing Resource-Oriented Learning Architectures

Keywords: management development, learning, SF learning principles, SF learning cycles, self-assessment, pre-course learning.

Summary

The solution focus can be an answer to deficit-orientation in management development. In my experience, management development needs to emphasize strategy and resources both in its orientation and its learning architecture. When designing for learning, the solution-focused approach integrates humanist, behaviourist and cognitivist learning principles. SF learning cycles allow learners to discover and think for themselves. Pre-course learning can be enhanced by the use of self-assessment tools and e-tutoring. Training units benefit from the use of SF questions and tools, which can be transferred relatively easily to a training setting. Particularly the contracting and introduction stages to learning units are important for increasing learners' awareness of their own goals and responsibility for their own development. Trainers need to coach rather than teach learners and stimulate them by asking questions rather than providing all the answers. Tools like scales, using a reflecting team, and solution-focused questions in doing case-work have proven useful.

Introduction

In my day-to-day life as consultant and trainer I am often confronted with a "deficit-oriented" approach to management development (MD), with the customers´ key message being "we are missing key skills, so please supplement them". While this may be appropriate as an initial impulse, it does not suffice in the planning and implementation of MD. What I am trying to encourage in customers is a strategy- and resource-oriented approach. What do I mean by that?

Strategy-oriented MD means

- a structured and planned process of supporting leaders to develop
- a focus on a positive scenario for the future of the organisation, on the success factors to achieve that future, and the organisation's plan, i.e. strategy, of how to get there
- ensuring that staff development corresponds with the future needs of the organisation and the direction it wants to take.

Resource-oriented MD means

- systematic and conscious learning processes that allow leaders to become aware of and deepen their own strengths
- learning that is oriented towards future challenges and tailored to individual challenges
- the focus is largely on what works and on leaders' past coping strategies
- many new themes and ideas are presented as options

In my experience people thrive and learn best in a climate of appreciation, challenge and empowerment. They must be able to recognize their achievements and draw lessons from their mistakes. The resource-oriented approach supports these preconditions for learning in an ideal way. It determines not only the process of planning the MD initiative, but also the constituent elements of the learning architecture. While I do not have the space to describe all possible elements of a good MD programme I would like to explore how traditional classroom-based MD programmes can benefit from the solution-focus.

SF Learning Principles

"Emotions, behaviour and thinking are the same thing looked at from different angles. They are not even at different levels. Only the doing is something people can see."[1]

All design for learning is determined by the learning principles or philosophy behind it. Having a humanist, experiential approach to training I at first found the SF concentration on behaviour disconcerting. Soon I realized, however, that the SF approach allows an integration of the behaviourist, cognitive and humanist approach to learning.

The "learner-centred" approach taken by the humanists (Rogers, Maslow et.al.) and their belief in addressing the whole person in designing for learning, not just the way a person behaves or what they think (Tribe, p. 112), comes closest to the SF approach in my perception. The respect shown for the individual and the scope given for personal development, the basic stance that the learner is indeed the owner of their own solutions, the SF expert making only tentative suggestions for personal change, and the different methods that empower the individual are for me at the core of SF learning principles.

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1 Steve de Shazer, Seminar "Coaching for Solutions", PEF University, March 15, 2004

In an SF learning initiative the learners are in control: they set their own learning goals and evaluate their own progress. The role of the trainer is to provide the conditions in which learning is likely to take place:

- a warm, positive climate
- opportunities for learning by active discovery
- broad aims defining the scope within which learners can set their own goals
- a range of learning resources and ideas for activities for learners to use and / or supplement as they choose
- acting as a facilitator throughout the course to help and encourage learners rather than as a teacher
- bringing together learners to exchange experiences – whether online or in the classroom (Shephard, p. 22)

However, I also consider some behaviourist and cognitivist learning principles to be indispensible for a SF learning initiative.

Behaviourist elements: (Skinner, Thorndike, Gagné)

- help learners set specific, observable objectives for themselves
- organise content into modules of progressive difficulty
- allow ample opportunities to practise followed by positive feedback and reinforcement (Gagné, p. 194)

Cognitivist elements: (Piaget, Bruner)

- teach learners how to analyse problems and understand general principles rather than repeat conditioned responses
- encourage people to think for themselves (Bruner, p. 167)
- give opportunities for guided discovery and reflection on new material

Another key element of SF learning principles in my view is using the inductive approach, encouraging learners to move from specific examples obtained through experience and active discovery, towards a generalised statement. I usually hold back from presenting material and asking learners to apply it unquestioningly. Instead, I use questions to encourage them to come to their own conclusions wherever possible. When I do offer new models or ideas I present them as one of many options which they can avail themselves of, or refuse (preferably after having tried them out!).

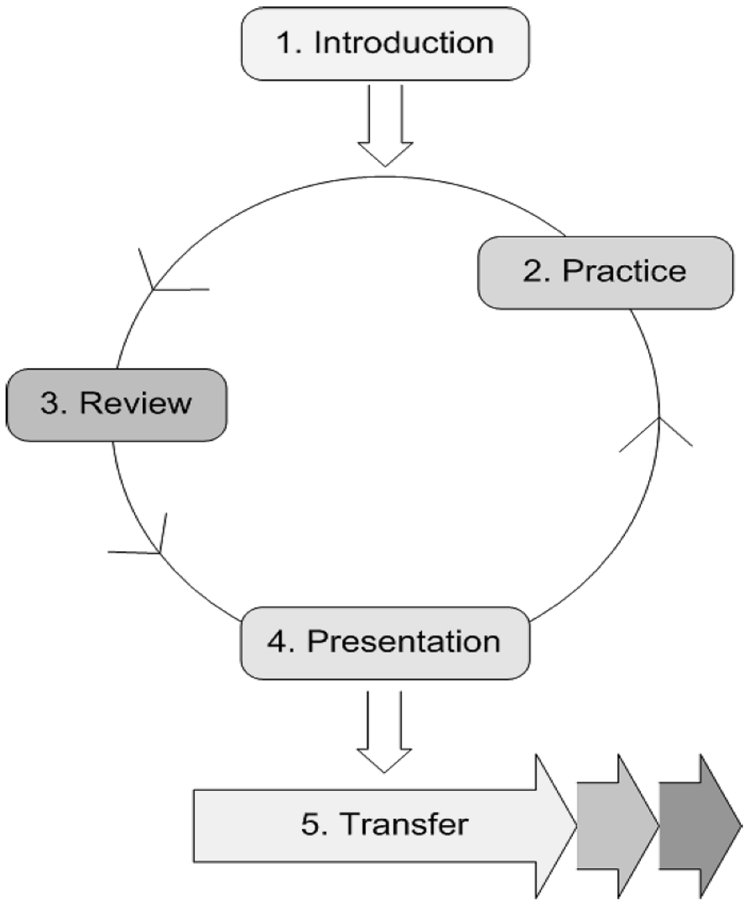
Another important principle concerns the pace of learning and the attitude of the trainer.

Despite the recent trend towards edutainment and the growing want for fast-paced and activating seminars, I believe it is necessary to get people to slow down and take responsibility for their own development. The slowing down does not mean that the course must be boring and flat. It should be varied, experiential, and emotionally appealing . But if people stay in the same overdrive that they usually have to adopt in order to function in their careers, they will not absorb very much. In order to really engage them and move them away from a consumer-stance, it is important to challenge them continuously in their own thinking about themselves. The best way to do this is to ask learners lots of questions, and then to listen and to adapt to them. Some tools and attitudes that help in this respect:

- getting learners to keep a seminar diary
- forming learning partnerships throughout the course
- introducing e-tutoring to allow a continuous accompaniment of the course
- engaging mentors actively in the MD programme
- offering coaching units in the MD programme

SF Learning Cycles

My training philosophy has led me to experimenting with the following SF learning cycles. Let me decribe the stages of this cycle:



Graphics S. Burgstaller

1. Introduction: The introduction can serve various purposes – contracting, setting realistic goals, de-briefing pre-course learning, self-assessment with regard to the subject, giving an overview of themes and process, attracting attention, etc.
2. Practice: Practical exercises can be used as a sort of laboratory from which learning can be derived experientially. I usually begin the learning cycle with some sort of experiential activity: a game, a role play, an exercise. In some instances, where this does not make sense, I begin with stage 3 – review.
3. Review: This contains a reflection and evaluation of learners' experiences in the previous exercise and/or in their "real lives". It is a way of drawing on learners' implicit knowledge and making it explicit. The key skill needed on the trainer's side is to formulate simple, solution-focused questions that work in a group setting.
4. Presentation: When I present materials, it is usually to apply formal labels and models to what learners have already formulated through discovery, or to stimulate them by providing them with new ideas. It is my job as a trainer to make learners see lots of options and choices, and then allow them to choose for themselves.
5. Transfer: This means planning to apply new approaches and knowledge to further practical activities and real tasks.

Different types of learners, such as activists, reflectors, theorists or pragmatists (Kolb, p. 52) may favour one stage in this cycle more than others, but all stages are necessary if learning is to be truly effective.

Pre-course learning

Just as SF therapists and coaches work with pre-session change, we work with and try to increase "pre-course learning". Personally, I maintain that all learning is actually happening in the real world "out there", not in the training modules. What we can do as trainers is to make people aware of their learning and increase the range of application of their existing skills wherever possible. "Pre-course learning" is part of that awareness-building process. Thus, in preparation for a module, I will ask learners

- to generally observe their behaviour with respect to the theme of the course (conflict management, communication, leadership situations, etc.)
- to assess themselves on a scale, to define what is 10 for them and where they want to be after the course
- how they will be able to tell that the course was good / useful for them
- to think about how relevant others (boss, staff, team-members, colleagues, friends,…) will notice that they have been on a course

This can be done in the e-tutoring session before the course or, if that is not possible, at the beginning of the course.

Self-Assessment and Preparation

An important tool in facilitating and structuring pre-course learning is the use of a self-assessment instrument. It can be usefully applied

- to allow learners to gauge the level of the programme
- to benchmark themselves against the standards set by the organisation for future / current leaders

As such it can complement – but not replace – the use of assessment centres as an entry gate to an MD programme since they function mainly as learning-interventions rather than as assessment tools. Self-assessments are sets of self-analysis instruments that allow learners to find out more about themselves. They facilitate reflection on their own personality in a structured way and familiarize them with some future themes of the programme. Participants learn some important issues about their personalities, their leadership / conflict / decision-making styles, their team-roles, their success criteria to date, their personal goals, etc.

Some useful ways to make self-assessment simpler and more concrete for delegates is

- to have a consistent behavioural focus in the assessment tool, rather than work with complex and abstract concepts
- to use simple, day-to-day language rather than expert terms
- to introduce scales into the self-assessment process
- asking participants to describe the "top of the scale" in their own terms, rather than only providing expert formulations that may be hard to grasp at the initial stages of learning
- encouraging participants to identify how they could do things better rather than asking them to spot their own weaknesses
- encouraging them to describe in detail the next small step they could make to change their behaviour in a particular aspect
- asking for coping strategies in the past (De Jong, Berg, p. 450)

Contracting / Goal Negotiation

At the beginning of the course and of each learning unit I spend some time "unpacking" the goals and wishes of learners in order to increase their own awareness and to give me an indication of what the needs of that particular group are. I maintain that every training course must be different since every group is different.

The answers to the sorts of questions cited above serve as a basis for this evaluation. It is much trickier than a coaching session, because here you have to deal with several, sometimes conflicting, wishes. Even if sometimes I don't want to hear because I have my plans and the needs of the organisation in my head, I listen to find out what the group's intentions are. I strongly believe that learners need to be treated as experts for their own learning and their will and goals must be respected.

Introduction to Training Units

A good way to get people in the mood for a solution-focused approach to their own learning is to ask them lots of questions that allow them to compliment themselves, to identify coping strategies and exceptions. Thus, I often start a session with either learning duos or in small groups with questions such as:

- Tell each other about your recent small successes regarding your work.
- What accomplishments are you most proud of so far - as a leader / junior manager / senior accountant / …?, etc.
- What did you do that got you nominated to this career development programme?
- What was the most difficult leadership situation you have been in so far? How did you cope with it? What did people notice about you?
- Can you remember a situation when you had to settle a dispute between colleagues? What did you do? How did people react?
- If somebody who knows you well were here now: How would they describe how you react in conflicts / deal with customers / approach this change project? What would they say you could learn in this respect? Etc.

These sorts of questions can be asked in a general way at the beginning of a course, and in a more focused way at the start of individual training units on specific themes.

Use of Scaling in Training Units

Scaling can be used in all shapes and forms at various stages of a training unit.

- To identify learning goals or skill level: "Where do you think you are with regard to subject X on a scale of 1-10? What do you need to move up one notch? What would people notice about you if you moved up one notch on the scale? What do you need to do in this course to help you move up one notch?"
- To identify attitudes and feelings towards an issue, increase empathy with other positions: Use a rope, string, or simply get people to stand in an imaginary line. Get them to talk about how it feels to stand there and what the differences are between one place or another. Get them to experiment with standing at different places (also at 10 and 1) and see how that feels.
- To give feedback on achievements or identify progress made: Use numbers on papers or voting cards with numbers. Get people to scale themselves first. Ask observers to scale other learners with scaling cards after a role-play or exercise,

for example. Ideally you have established a shared understanding first of what it means to be at 10.

SF Case work

Dealing with "real cases" is an important learning element in any MD programme. Here is an example of a SF alternative to doing problem-solving case-work:

1. The case-owner describes the case in her / his own words.
   The group listens. (10 min)
2. The group asks the case-owner the following questions: (20-30 min)
   - How could you find out that your problem was solved? What are the first small things that you would notice? (describe solution)
   - On a scale of 1-10, where do you stand today in regard to your problem? How would you notice that you have move up one notch? (scale)
   - What are important signposts that tell you that you are getting there? (signposts)
   - What can you do that will make a difference in this situation? (helpful activities)
   - What will your boss / other people in the organisation notice if this happens? (outside perspective)
3. The group brainstorms answers to the following questions, the case-owner listens. (20-30 min)
   - What does the case-owner want to achieve? What solution is s/he striving for?
   - What have you noticed that the case-owner is doing well? (compliments)
   - What shows you that s/he is already making progress towards that goal?
   - What further options for helpful activities are there?
   - If you were in the situation of the case-owner: What goals would you see? What would you do in the situation?
4. The case-owner gives feedback on what s/he heard and experienced during the last discussion. (10 min)
5. The group prepares to report to the plenary. (10 min)

Conclusion

Using a SF approach to training I have made the following practical observations:

- The positive atmosphere created by SF learning principles is very conducive to learning.
- Emphasizing goal negotiation, self assessment, and a generally empowering approach to learners, strengthens their sense of responsibility for their own learning.
- E-tutoring allows a better integration of the different elements of an MD programme. The use of SF questions in an online community works well.
- The role of the trainer shifts from expert towards mentor / coach.
- The SF approach also works very well in intercultural settings. In some cultures the tendency is stronger to expect directions and advice from the trainer, but even there the solutions focus is generally welcomed.
- Trainers must rid themselves of their content models in order to train effectively. People and their context are more important than covering content.

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Felix Hirschburger

The Formula for Resourceful Evaluation of Training and Coaching

$$\mathbf{E}\text{valuation} = \mathbf{M}\text{easurement} \times \mathbf{C}\text{oaching}^{2}$$

Keywords: Evaluation, Solution-Focused, Training and Development, Coaching

Summary

The center of resourceful evaluation helps to transform a not realized difference into a difference that makes a difference. This conclusion is deduced from Steve de Shazer's thoughts about the way to find solutions and also works in this setting, because change doesn't ask for any specific setting. "The therapist's stance is not if change will occur, but rather when, or where, or what type of changing will occur" (De Shazer 1984: 17).

Positive change, learning and development are often a result of

- finding what works and do more of it,
- stop doing what doesn't work and do something different.

That's how Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg developed and unveiled their Brief Therapy.

Because this approach proved to work so well in many different settings, I chose to do more of it and focused on a resourceful evaluation of training and coaching. Instead of watching training or coaching sessions from behind the one way mirror, some weeks later I started asking the coachees and trainees questions like: "What has been most helpful for you? How come this was helpful? What could be the next small step to put the training transfer within your workplace one step ahead?"

Thus the main goal of this special form of evaluation is to reinforce learning and positive change for all involved parties. A nice side effect is that coaches, trainers or organisations get a summary of results, positive effects, and improvement opportunities.

Making "intangible change" visible is not an easy task. In the following you'll find a tool to show the benefit of your work, as a trainer, coach or HR-professional, and reinforce it Solution-Focused.

> My goal is to give you an approach which keeps you and your clients in the learning loop and shows your potential clients what they can look forward to when they decide to work with you.
>
> I would like to explain why I'm convinced this kind of evaluation has those positive effects. The gist is "attention":

An attempt to explain "attention" and why it is so important where you focus it on

According to Wittgenstein, attention has attained the status of a natural category (Wittgenstein 1953: 12). For the ancestor of psychology, William James, attention seemed to be something quite clear: "Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of several possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization and concentration of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others (James 1890: 403-404).

Unfortunately that does not make the term much clearer. Perhaps it's easier to actually experience what attention can mean:

> We hear noises constantly. But to which of all these noises do you pay attention to?

Please read this sentence once again, very slowly and calmly:

> We hear noises constantly. But to which of all these noises do you pay attention to?

You might have recognized that the acoustical impressions became more intense. Now, please listen very attentively to what you are hearing – be relaxed, but still all ears.

What was the difference? We can't focus our ears, like we can do that with our eyes. But our attention can be changed and focused. Attention acts as a gate for information flow into the brain. It has often been thought of as a "spotlight" that illuminates certain areas thereby enhancing performance in those areas (Cohen 1993: 3-4).

To illustrate this, another example: As you read this, you are probably not aware of how your left foot feels in your shoe. Although your brain was receiving sensory input from your foot, you were not aware of it because you were reading and not attending to it. But now, this discussion led you to move your attention to your left foot and to become aware of it. Isn't that true?

Guiding people's attention to where it is most beneficial

It is very important where the focus of attention lies. William James said: "My experience is what I agree to attend to" (James 1890: 380). According to him, attention seems to be a creative process - it creates individual experiences and therefore individual reality.

We have seen that where we focus our attention on, we get more information, a deeper insight, and an enhanced performance.

That's why it is so important to find approaches which guide people's attention to the areas where the potential change is most useful for them and their system.

Or in other words, since our experience is related to what we agree to attend to, we need to be attentive to where our focus of attention is.

This explains why putting the main focus of people's attention to things which already worked during or after the training or coaching means reinforcing the positive change.

Understanding evaluation mainly as a means to keep going and reinforce what already works, we need to change the focus on what we point our attention to in different ways:

Evaluation as a valuation of what is already there in the everyday environment of the learner

Training or coaching can only be a starting point. Its actual impact will be seen in the daily business of your clients. With questionnaires, people normally have to fill in after seminars you could wallpaper whole training rooms. But very few point the focus of the evaluation to the real working situation.

It is important to help trainees and coachees to see more clearly what they are doing differently and better after the intervention and what could be helpful to keep this change alive.

Thus the goal of every evaluation should be a mutual one: Searching for the positive impact, for refinements, and also reinforce the already achieved change.

Einstein's famous formula $e=mc^2$ serves us as a metaphor in doing so:

$$\mathbf{E}\text{ valuation} = \mathbf{M}\text{ easurement x }\mathbf{C}\text{ oaching}^{\mathbf{2}}$$

"m" like mass or measurement: Evaluation has to do with measurement, that's for sure. Again, it is crucial that you measure what is really important. That's why you look for the development in the day-to-day work and focus on measurable differences in the client's system.

"c" like speed of light or coaching: To reinforce the success of the training or coaching with the evaluation itself we can't limit it only to measurement.

Here coaching comes into play. There is always something that works well and that's exactly what we want to focus on now. Questions like: "How does your boss realize that you behave differently in conflict situations?" allows you an interesting change of perspective at first glance. However, on a more subtle level, this thinking process strengthens the new emerging reality by guiding the attention to positive changes.

Another physicist supports this assumption too: Heisenberg showed that each observation has an impact on the observed object. And we can affect the impact by choosing what we observe.

According to a study by the International Personnel Management Association, training alone increased productivity by 22.4%, while training plus coaching increased productivity by 88%.

" 2 " because this form of evaluation is kind of a meta-coaching by revealing achievements and potentialities of the coaching or training itself.

We see that evaluation doesn't have to be pure measurement and therefore disenchanting the often hard to grasp change process. Using the right approach, it's astonishing how natural participants express these soft elements and how much they like to talk about it – if not in concrete language, they tell informative stories or metaphors.

Asking helpful questions

To keep it simple we focus at this point on the evaluation after the finished training or coaching. Depending on the project, in general 6-8 weeks after you've finished your work, you could ask questions like:

- m-question: Looking back to the last weeks, how useful has the team coaching been for you? 10 = incredibly useful / 1 = a complete waste of time and money. What does this (let's say) 6 mean for you?
- c-question: And what exactly was useful to you? What would have been different on a 7?

These questions relate more to the past and your accomplished work. Even more interesting is to ask about the transfer, about the first (even if they are little) successes in their everyday environment.

- c-questions: What's already working in your day-to-day work? How does your staff react on that? If I were to ask your boss, what would he see as a step forward?

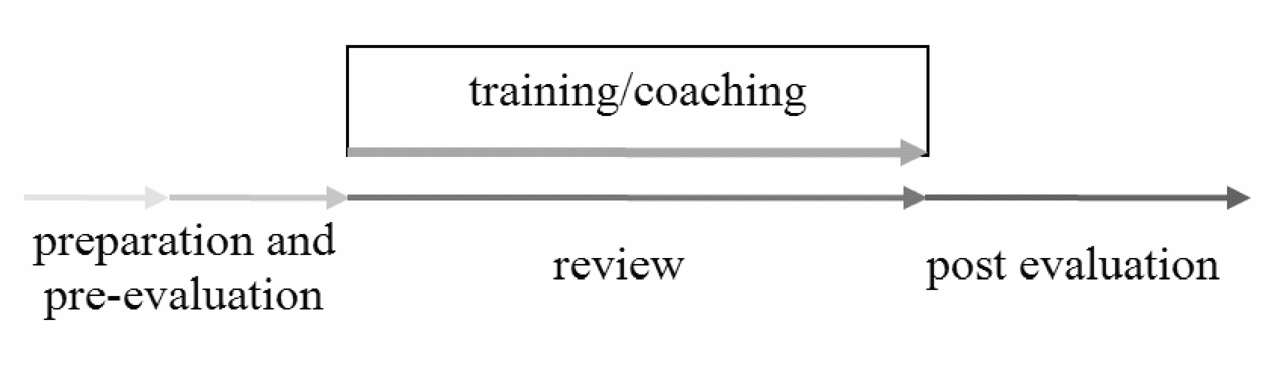
We all know the opening and creative nature of such questions. Additionally we can spot another phenomenon. As soon as people realize that someone is really interested in their own development, they feel appreciated and react with an increased motivation to do good work. This is well-known as the Hawthorne Effect. During Mayo's researches at the Western Electric Company, to find what could be done to enhance productivity, he stated: "So the provision of an impartial person to observe change became itself the greatest change." (Mayo 1930: 96) I wouldn't go that far, but for sure it contributes to the training and coaching effects.

Good methods, a pleasant atmosphere, high standard working papers or an effective coaching approach are very important. Nevertheless, the most important thing is the result of your training or coaching and evaluation can be a transfer safeguard.

"e" like energy or evaluation. If evaluation is seen from this perspective, new energy can emerge for you and your clients.

Guideline for an ideal evaluation process

In the following an ideal evaluation process will be described. Of course these elements can be used modularly to fit your needs and projects.



Preparation and pre-evaluation

An ideal evaluation already starts during the first contact with your client.

Because of the growing internal cost control within companies the commissioning didn't get easier. So please help your potential client with this. Clear statements about the process, how you want to check regarding the effect and benefit of your work, strengthen the trust, gives safety and goes with the quality standards management companies often have in place.

If you get approached by a company the most important thing in the beginning is to clarify the assignment and the expectations. The better the goal is defined quantitatively and qualitatively the easier the possibility to check the results of your work afterwards.

This is not always easy, especially if you are working on soft factors. We can't for example really measure to what extent someone has, or has not, "high communication skills". However, we can measure how someone who wants to have better communications skills behaves by asking:

If you had better communications skills, what would be different? How would things change? What would you do differently? Imagine that it's six months from now. This coaching has worked very well for you, and you have much better communications skills. What will have changed? How will your boss realize that this coaching was successful?

In general helpful questions could be:

How would you realize that the coaching was successful?

Which benefit would you have out of a successful training?

What needs to happen in this training that it would be really worth it for you?

How would your colleague realize that you've learned something important?

What will you do differently in which situations?

Which of your qualities will you use more often?

You can also work with what is there. Look for criteria and procedures the company already has in place to track change. Are there already certain guidelines? For example information about the quality management, budget, MbO standards, or the like could be helpful. Of course these guidelines must fit your assignment, but if you can, make use of those procedures which are already in place and ask what else could be a criteria or a desired output.

Here is a short checklist about information that could be helpful before you start with your work:

Do you have the latest information about the project?

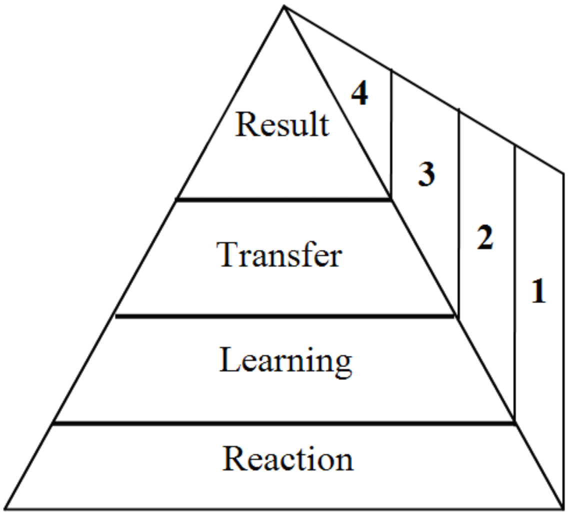
Do you know the companies quality management?

Are the goals and expectations sufficiently clear and tangible?

Which results do the different stakeholders expect?

Do you know the actual personal agreement on objectives (like MbO etc.)?

Another helpful framework to set measurable goals and evaluate them afterwards, is Kirkpatrick's old but well-known four-level model (Kirkpatrick 1959).



Level 1: Reaction

What are desired responds to the training or coaching? What are favourable immediate reactions? What could participants notice in the seminar that would make it an inspiring experience for them?

Level 2: Learning

What exactly should be learned during the process? Which new skills should be imparted?

Level 3: Transfer into the workplace

What would be favourable applications in the day-to-day work out of the training or coaching? How would we realize that the newly acquired skills, knowledge, or attitude being used in the everyday environment of the learner? How would participants' colleagues notice that the seminar was successful a month after?

Level 4: Business results

What business results could have a direct reference to training or coaching effects? What is the desired change in sales volume? How would the management notice that the seminar was successful?

Generally it's a good idea to show the management that you care about level 3 and 4 – you care for the company's changes and success.

Review during the process:

Of course it's of great value if you can review the running process from time to time. An interesting approach is using techniques from Appreciative Inquiry, which can't be described in more details at this point (for more information please see for example: AI Practitioner "Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation of Training Programs: World Bank Institute"). Otherwise some Solution-Focused questions on and off direct the attention in a worthwhile way. According to de Shazer change is inevitable, therefore we focus on the differences that make a difference. For example with these questions:

What's better, even a little bit?

How did you do that?

How can you keep this progress?

What's already working in the right direction?

What's already clear?

Which competences of the trainer support you in your learning process?

If you plan not to put anything into practice what you've learned so far, how would you do that?

Post-evaluation:

This is the usual moment when people do evaluations and has been discussed earlier in this article. Here are some more examples:

What did you achieve in the meantime with what you've learned?

What are you most proud of?

How did you do that?

How do others realize that you've made progress?

What do you like best about the change?

What did you learn?

How will you use this learning in the next situation?

Conclusion:

- The quality and success of your work is measurable.
- A resourceful evaluation doesn't only measure the benefit, but also reinforces it.

Through the evaluation the training or coaching can be perpetuated in the company or clients live itself. Resourceful evaluation helps all parties involved to make progress and shows potential clients what they can expect when they work with you.

Practically these evaluations are usually done by short (around 20min) conversations by phone or one to one. Another interesting option can be a tailored online-survey. Resourceful evaluation has also been tested in group settings and worked very well too. Findings can be delivered in a report, CD or presentation.

Stability is an illusion, and change constant. The closer we look for small changes, the more we will notice them. Having recognized some little thing can set in motion for more and more changes. Hopefully I could help you to find a way to direct your and your client's attention to more positive changes that are already occurring.

We have to measure and reinforce what we can but accept that many of the benefits of coaching and training will always be as intangible and incalculable as the value of an honest compliment or sitting in the sun next to a lake on a beautiful summer afternoon.

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Susanne Keck

Solution-Focused Error Management

Keywords: error management, error culture, error management culture

Summary

At the moment there are a lot of discussions about error management and error culture in organizations – also in terms of quality management, learning organization or continuous improvement process. A common point of view is that organizations should be more open towards accepting and learning from mistakes whilst reality still looks very different. What can the Solution-Focused approach contribute to the issues of error management and error culture? The Solution-Focused approach supports a different and useful view on errors. It features a realistic and flexible attitude towards complex situations. From a Solution-Focused point of view the question is not in how far we can avoid making mistakes but how we can deal effectively with a continuously changing and challenging world. The mentioned SF-techniques encourage reframing of “errors”, activate resources, help set useful goals and take adequate actions in critical situations and support talking about “errors” without losing face.

Introduction

Error Management – theoretical classification and new approaches

Error management can be theoretically divided into prevention and coping. Especially German and other middle European organizational cultures are said to accentuate the prevention of errors (zero error tolerance) while there are very few approaches dealing with psychological coping strategies *after* errors in organizations occurred. Furthermore there are hardly any *practiced* and *lived* approaches that accept errors as something useful or at least normal (Zapf/Fresel/Broedbeck 1999, p 405). At the moment there are discussions about the need to change organizational cultures into being more open to learning from errors.

Professor Frese and his team from the psychological department at university Gießen published one of the few scientific paper on this subject in 2005 “Organizational error management culture and its impact on performance” stating that the profitability of medium-sized companies having a high organizational error management culture increases by 20 % (VanDyck/Frese/Baer/Sonnentag 2005, p. 1235). Consequently accepting, communicating and learning from errors appears to be more reasonable that covering them up or wanting to eradicate them.

What is an error and why do humans make errors?

An error can only occur when there is an intentional action with a specific objective – and the error is to miss the goal or sub-goal (Zapf/Frese/Broedbeck 1999, p 398). Why does this happen? There are several reasons and I want to focus on an important one: in contrast to computers humans have the excellent ability to be able to stay capable of acting or deciding even in highly complex situations with conflicting information and interests (which is an everyday situation in an organization) – but they run the risk of making mistakes (Wehner 1997, p. 469). In organizations with low error management culture the following happens: measures are taken to eliminate or hide the error – which often results in more errors. In organizations with high error management culture the error is communicated and dealt with.

New approaches: error management training and ways of communicating about "almost-errors"

You might say: what about airlines, hospitals, nuclear power plants and other sectors in which one error can have catastrophic results? How is it possible to live with a high error management culture there? There are two interesting new approaches - not only for high security sectors but for any organization in which making an error can have very undesirable consequences: a) allowing errors during training and b) communication about "almost-errors".

About a): Professor Frese and his team at university Gießen demonstrated in an experiment that participants of trainings who were allowed to make mistakes during training were able to learn the specific skills better than participants who were instructed to avoid errors during training (which is the traditional way). They call this approach "error management training" (Heimbeck/Frese/Sonnentag/Keith 2003, p. 334). About b): in 2002 the "Berliner Gesundheitspreis" (an award in the health sector) was given to a group in Switzerland who created an anonymous computer-based information exchange platform for critical incidences and "almost-errors" in hospitals. In the honorific speech it was pointed out that until today error management in the health sector (and in my opinion not only there) mostly means looking for a scapegoat (www.aerztekammer-berlin.de). Maybe communication about errors and "almost-errors" is more beneficial in the long-run than solely communicating about best-practice examples. Best-practice examples are sometimes a very helpful means, but talking about "almost-errors" seems especially useful and Solution-Focused since people can talk about something that did *not* go wrong in the end and do *not* lose face.

Reframing of errors

Another relatively new approach (often called error-management in contrast to error prevention) is reframing the traditional interpretation of errors; an approach that is very close to a solutions-focused attitude. There are a lot of possible reframings of errors and situations.

A) Wehner – one of the few researchers on this subject - claims to free errors from taboos. He reframes them as the *subjectively only* possible way of acting in a given situation that was *subjectively correct* (Wehner 1997, p. 469). Probably not the error is the problem but the cultural *interpretation* and *reaction* (Zapf/Frese/Broedbeck 1999, p. 407). This implicates that people have good intentions – they do what they do because they assume that this is the best thing to do in a given situation. If this not the case the problem is sabotage rather than an error.

B) As mentioned above: humans are not computers – they are able to do what they do *because* they are not computers. Trying to eradicate errors takes a lot of human abilities away – instead of featuring them. This also means that it is sometimes better to deal with the world as it is and feature what works than trying the impossible (Wehner, 1997, p. 470).

C) Kierkegaard said: Life can only be understood backwards, but it has to be lived forwards. The question is: what can we really learn from errors and in how far can analyzing errors help when life always brings new unexpected situations and forces us to make quick decisions?

Solution-Focused Approach in Error Management

Is it a Solution-Focused idea to "bring" organizations a new error culture?

The traditional consultant wants to change an organization by teaching new concrete ideas that are said to make the organization more effective. This is surely not the SF-way of management consultancy. In the following I want to show that a truly Solution-Focused attitude already *contains* a high error management culture, that Solution-Focused consultancy and management already *is* a desirable error culture. The following SF-tools and methods are well-known and can be used in coaching, workshops or other management consultancy settings dealing with error management – but my main concern is to show that the SF-*attitude* inherently deals with so called "errors" in a way that allows learning without imposing an "error culture" on an organization or other customer.

"Analyzing" the problem

In most organizations the first step towards coping with a critical incidence or error is to analyze what went wrong and why. While this is a very adequate procedure when dealing with a machine, it leads to poor results regarding solutions when dealing with highly complex human systems (Berg/Szabo 2005, p. 6). But since the need for analysis is often highlighted there might be different ways of looking at an incident that opens doors towards coping rather than focusing on what went wrong. In the following I want to show some ideas about analyzing an error without constantly talking about what went wrong:

Looking in how far it was normal - normalizing

Normalizing is a Solution-Focused reaction towards problem speech suggesting that the problem – in this case the error and the consequences - might be within the bandwidth of "normal" incidents (Berg/DeJong, 1998, p. 76). It is human to make mistakes and everybody seems to know that, even psychology can prove it – but everybody who has just made a "mistake" seems to forget it. And it is also human to react in a certain way, for example feeling shame or guilt or blaming someone for the mistake (Zapf/Frese/Broedbeck 1999, p. 408/409). For example in an organization that has a very low error management culture it shows *more* social intelligence to hide an error. In a very complex situation it might be *normal* to make a quick decision without being able to anticipate every possible outcome (for example Dietrich Dörner shows that it is extremely difficult to find rather quick solutions to very complex problems without making errors; Dörner 2005, p. 293 ff).

Of course it is not a Solution-Focused attitude to teach the customers about how normal it is to make mistakes or, worse, trying to minimize their problem. Everything in SF-consultancy is about accepting the customer in his appraisal of the situation (e.g. that making this mistake should never have happened) and asking *questions* that open new perspectives (Berg/Szabo 2005, p. 17): e.g. asking in how far it was expectable or inevitable under the given circumstances; with humorous customers this can be really funny.

Looking at what was good - reframing

Like Wehner said – mentioned above – an error might have been the *only* possible and *subjectively* correct way of acting in a given situation. For example: to withhold information might be an "error", but on the other hand it might be the subjective correct reaction; making a decision that turned out to have negative implications might be an "error", but under the circumstances it might have been a reasonable proceeding. Despite the fact that a certain goal was not reached there was still the *intention* of reaching it, meaning: there was a positive intention and good will. If not, it is not an error, but sabotage – until proven otherwise we as SF-consultants believe that people try their best in a given situation (Berg/Szabo, 2005, p. 21). So analyzing the error could mean to analyze how it was the *right* thing to do rather than the traditional kind of "problem-analysis" which means finding out what was wrong (for finding out what went wrong it might be better to ask: what will we do differently next time?).

Like above it is important to mention that this does not mean to antagonize the customer, but to ask good question that open up new ways of looking at things: In how far was your proceeding the right thing to do given the information you had and the situation? What well-meant targets or long-term goals did you have in mind when you made this decision? What went good despite the error (also see: coping)?

Asking what for - superior goals

Behind the wish to analyze what went wrong often lie superior goals, while the analysis is supposed to be the means to an end. What secondary gain lies behind the wish to analyze the problem or finding the guilty person (maybe finding a way out, bringing the issue to a termination, finding better ways of dealing with things)? Are there other ways of reaching this goal but by concentrating on what went wrong? By asking questions like this there are good chances that the process turns from analyzing what went wrong to talking about what would be a favorable outcome, means: a solution focus (see Berg/DeJong 1998, p. 127 ff).

How can it go on? Coping!

“The problem is not the problem. Coping with the problem is the problem.” (Virginia Satir)

"Problems that are created by our current level of thinking can't be solved by that same level of thinking." (Albert Einstein)

The next step after “analyzing” is discussing how it can go on after the incident. In organizations this usually means to find out how errors like that can be avoided in the future (and who is guilty). Mostly the focus lies on the analysis followed by quick reactions while planning the solution is rather disregarded or there is an attempt to find the solution *within* the problem. All this are very human reactions to a problem and as consultants we traditionally are supposed to see and explain what went wrong and tell the customer quickly how to do better in the future (and also these expectations towards an expert are very human). In a Solution-Focused attitude it is sometimes more useful to concentrate on a) coping with the problem (instead of concentrating on the problem itself) and b) finding new ways to look at things.

How would you know that the problem is accomplished? Setting Goals!

In most cases the incident or error is not the real problem but the subsequent *reactions* and *consequences* (Zapf/Frese/Broedbeck, 1999, p. 407). What happened happened and cannot be changed - but the perspective can be changed (as we saw above) and the consequences can be dealt with in a useful way. It is the consultants’ task to initiate a Solution-Focused discussion about how things would be like if the incident was accomplished in a helpful way - without downplaying the seriousness of the incident. Questions can be: How would you know that this problem is solved in the best possible way/ that you coped with it successfully (it is better to use the word “*coping*” when the client/s seem/s rather hopeless to "*solve*" it)? How would other people (colleagues, other organizational divisions, competitors, customers) realize that you solved the problem/ coped with the situation successfully? - In this way you get a picture of how your customer wants the future to be and sub-goals can be defined by working with scales (see: Berg/DeJong, 1998 and Berg/Szabo, 2005).

Finding and activating resources

For dealing with a difficult situation and reaching a goal everybody, every organization needs resources. Talking about what went wrong does not activate a lot of resources but a Solution-Focused attitude does (Mehlmann/Röse 2000, p. 29). Adequate questions are: What happens in your life/ team/ division/ organization that tells you that you will be able to solve/ cope with the problem? Was there another difficult situation in the past that you successfully solved or coped with – how did you do that (asking for exceptions)? For finding, activating and planning the growth of resources there are several techniques that can be applied, for instance by scaling resources (Mehlmann/Röse 2000, p. 105 ff).

Deceleration and useful goals

Here it is important to state that it is very useful to decelerate these processes of planning the future and finding resources. Executives are understandably very interested in retaliatory action and quick results, especially if something extremely unpleasant happened. How managers react to errors reflects the error culture of the organisation – they are acting adequate in terms of their culture and their reaction can only be truly changed if the basic attitude changes! But these changes cannot be forced. It is the consultants' task to create an all-clear atmosphere and a sense of new possibilities and restart – rather than join the panic and confusion. Sometimes we as consultants might think that what our customers are doing is "wrong" (just another "error" on top of the first one) and maybe this estimation might even be somehow true from our particular perspective. But instead of instructing and introducing measures too early it is often better to ask good questions: What happens in your life/ team/ organization that tells you that this is the right thing to do? In how far is this helpful for you/ your colleagues/ customers? How would your colleagues/ team/ line manager/ customers react to that? In how far will this contribute to a good atmosphere and motivation? By asking questions like that the process is decelerated and reactions can be planned with their consequences in mind.

Creating solutions en route

Instead of initiating change by planning a desired outcome and distinct steps towards the goal it is often more useful to create solutions en route. That means: we surely explore how the customer wishes the future to be but we do not plan all the steps that it takes to reach it in detail. We simply start where we are right now and plan the *next* step extensively (the more difficult the situation the easier the first step should be). As the saying goes: all roads lead to Rome. These proceeding guarantees flexible actions and undesirable circumstances can more easily be foreseen and reacted to – especially in times of change and crisis. This also means: our interventions do not have to be exhaustive, nor does the whole problem have to be solved “forever”. It is enough to have a good start and go step by step, considering all the incidents and changes that lie on the way. Furthermore it is necessary to start working with what is there and feature what works and what resources are obvious (see Mehlmann/Röse 2000, p. 29 ff). This Solution-Focused attitude can be a very pragmatic and realistic approach to a rapidly changing and challenging world. It is the consultants` task to stay as flexible as he/she expects the customer to be by accepting the customers appraisals, even if the customer (a person/ group etc.) falls back into problem oriented thinking and analyzing the error.

Learning from errors

The overall question is: what and how can we learn from our errors. Instead of staring at the error and finding out what we could have done better in the past, we can ask: what can we do better in the future? This is just a small shift in attention, another way of looking at things that can make a big difference concerning motivation and resources. Furthermore we can ask: which oft these things you can do better in the future have you already done a little bit in the past? How can you do a little more?

Conclusion

We saw that Solution-Focused management consultancy is a very adequate means for error management. In addition the Solution-Focused attitude helps creating a useful error culture in organizations because

a) It has a high flexibility and allows adjustment

b) It implies that situations and circumstances always change

c) It has a strong focus on empowerment and making the best of a situation

d) It deals with finding solutions rather than analyzing problems

e) And thus is able to activate resources.

Reframing

Error cultures can only be changed if the basic attitude toward errors is changed – as consultants we can only propose and *live* this new way of looking at things, not impose it on an organisation. We can do this by

a) concentrating on what works and motivating clients to do more of it

b) starting new ways of looking at things while the old one does not have to stop completely ("It is easier to start new behaviour than stop old one" (Insoo Kim Berg))

c) Go step by step

d) Help coping instead of analysing what went wrong

e) Concentrating on the future and what can be done better instead of analysing what went wrong in the past

f) Finding useful goals and activating resources

g) Having a pragmatic and flexible attitude

h) Featuring human capabilities instead of trying to improve them

How and what can we learn from errors?

Wehners statement that a so called error is the *subjectively only possible* and *subjectively correct* way of acting in a given situation casts a different light on the subject. Maybe the only thing we can really learn from mistakes or failure is that we cannot eradicate them. This does not mean that we have to do the same mistake over and over again – but how often are situations really similar or comparable? We learn not to do the one thing in a given situation while the same thing is the right reaction in another situation. It seems like we can only deal with an ever changing and challenging world by trying our best, reacting flexibly to ambiguous situations and doing what links with our capabilities, attitudes and goals as a person or organization. For this mission the Solution-Focused approach surely is a good companion.

Final (a little provocative) words

If you don´t want errors

a) Talk about them less but talk about what works

b) Concentrate less on avoiding them constantly but concentrate on doing the best

c) Learn from some of them (not all of them) by concentrating on what you can do better in the future

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Vikki Powell & Colin Coombs

Using SF to accelerate a performance and development culture

Key words: Performance & development planning, coaching, training, skills, management, solutions focus, systemic, systematic, ripple effect

Summary

The quest for the most effective performance and development culture is the focus of many HR and Learning and Development departments. Decisions regarding staff selection, performance measurement, and skill development are all influenced by the existing culture of an organisation, and perhaps more importantly, the culture the organisation is aiming to establish.

In this complex issue then of aligning staff, organisation and services with one culture that is still in transition, many organisations tackle this with one-size-fits-all models that offer systems and processes within stand-alone training programmes. The alternative to this is to work with the resources available and exploit the interactions and relationships individuals already hold, to bring about informal structures of learning to develop, work within, and contribute to the evolving culture. “You need to update the skills so that people have new techniques to cope with whatever comes their way. Previously the investment has been in machinery, now the investment is in people.” (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: 21st Century Skills, 2003)

This article will describe some of the actions taken by one UK organisation (Tate) to address the development of its culture using solutions focussed thinking in both an implicit and explicit manner. One key aspect of this approach being the attention and value given to separate interactions and their systemic spread – this is described as “complex adaptive systems” in SF terms (Jackson & McKergow 2002). It will also draw upon the work of Schein (cited in Mullins 2002) and his suggestion that organisational culture and it’s learning can be distinguished on three levels: Artefacts (environment, language, overt behaviour); Values (transforming solutions into beliefs); and Basic underlying assumptions (unconsciously learned responses that guide behaviour).

Context

Tate is one of the biggest and most important galleries in the UK, attracting more than 6 million visitors a year. There are five sites: Tate Britain, Tate Modern and Tate Store in London, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives. It employs a total of 740 people (excluding retail and catering), of which around 200 have supervisory or line responsibility. The vast majority of employees work in London. In common with many major UK cultural institutions, Tate is funded by Grant-in-Aid from Parliament which is increasingly supplemented by other sources including trading, admissions to temporary exhibitions and sponsorship. In order to achieve its mission to increase knowledge, understanding and appreciation of art Tate mounts a wide range of exhibitions and runs an extensive education and community-based programme.

When the current Learning and Development (L&D) manager joined Tate in October 2003, a core programme of traditional training was in place but he quickly realised that some managers were seeing this as a ‘shopping list’ of courses rather than thinking about what the individual might want to be able to do differently. Managers were also not giving much thought to how they could be supported in applying the learning back in the workplace.

As part of his new role, the L&D manager produced a learning and development strategy for Tate. It was important to provide support that could help the organisation and its employees focus on the possibilities and strengths within a highly successful organisation, and draw focus away from the negative aspects of change and difficulty. A list of goals to work towards was drawn up. To make this strategy work there had to be a cultural shift which involved:

- Managers taking responsibility for facilitating the learning and development of their team members.
- Employees identifying their own development needs linked to their departmental (and hence Tate’s) plans
- All employees moving away from a ‘training course’ and ‘tick list’ culture of development and towards a more organic, coaching approach which could be used as a common language throughout the organisation

All of these aims are linked, mutually dependent and require real changes in individual interactions.

Key Initiatives

Two key initiatives were launched to support the strategic aims of Learning & Development, each using SF principles in its design and implementation. These initiatives were:

1. To revise and re-launch the existing performance management system (now renamed Performance and Development Planning or P&DP) which moves focus away from the forms and on to the interactions between a manager and their team-member.
2. Developing the coaching skills of line managers, to be used formally and informally in everyday situations

How we approached these initiatives

In order to address the need for both structured plans appealing to the influential senior management, and harnessing the less visible influencers such as rumour and storytelling Tate had from the start a two pronged plan: be systematic in planning and systemic in development. We have come to refer to this as the *'ripple effect'*.

The *'ripple effect'* is a metaphor to describe a non-linear and ever-increasing impact emanating from one small central action. The desired outcome of the *ripple effect* would be to see single positive differences by a number of people, leading to further changes in the actions of others, constantly spreading outwards under its own momentum.

We do not claim that this approach is suitable for all contexts, it is used here as a descriptor of the rationale for the way in which initiatives were delivered and developed to help accelerate an effective performance and development culture at Tate.

Applying SF and the ripple effect in each initiative

In addressing Schein's first level of culture – Artefacts – the first initiative was a complete revision of the content of the existing appraisal system. The original did not suit the evolving culture with its emphasis on reviewing past performance rather than open discussions on development, future opportunities and responsibilities for the development. There was significant consultation, drafting and piloting before a new cycle was developed and released in January 2005 and it was revised again in response to user comments in February 2006

Careful use of the language of the process (changing from 'appraisal' to 'performance and development planning') to give a sense of something dynamic and forward looking was critical to help people get used to the hoped-for cultural shift. A key element of the new process is the discussion prompts that focus on examining:

- What has worked
- What could have worked even better
- What needs to be different to bring about improvements
- What has been learned

The discussion based around the above, is intended to help managers and their team members individually navigate their progress from using the words (Artefacts – level 1) to believing their worth (Values – level 2).

The decision to provide skills training to managers to help them coach their staff, was aimed at improving all three strategic aims relating to learning and development of staff. Whilst the importance of each aim can be given an ordinal ranking (see Table 1), it is clear that each are interlinked and improving one would have a ripple effect in improving the others.

	Avoid tick list	Self-sufficiency	Staff satisfaction
Coaching skills	3rd	1st	2nd
PDP system	3rd	1st	2nd

Table 1: Ordinal ranking importance of aim in relation to the two key initiatives

In order to make the training a reflection of the broader initiatives and cultural emphasis, the programme content drew upon the work of A. Grant and J.Greene in their book “Solutions Focused Coaching (2003) and all managers attending the programme receive a copy of this book. To maintain the philosophy of small interactions and not ‘big push’ approach however it was a conscious decision to make the SF content implicit. This involved integrating traditional coaching know how and models with SF questions and principles and workshop style. One specific element of this was the activity of “speed coaching” – adapted from Grant & Greene’s “corridor coaching”. A full briefing for this activity can be found at Appendix A

We have highlighted this activity as a good demonstration of helping individual managers use coaching skills as part of their overall repertoire or approach as a manager at Tate, rather than seeing coaching as a formal and infrequently used role. The concept of ‘speed coaching’ is about reacting like a coach and helping people in small easy-to-do ways.

At the time of writing (July 2006), 15 coaching programmes have run. Each two-day programme takes place off-site and has two facilitators working with a group of six to nine participants. About three weeks later, each participant has a confidential one-to-one coaching session with one of the facilitators (an external coach from Positive People Consulting). The second facilitator, Tate’s Learning and Development Manager, then runs a half-day follow-up session three times a year so that anyone who attended the initial programme at least two months previously can join participants from other programmes to share learning and extend their skills. This design is intended to maintain the momentum of the learning.

A total of 86 managers have attended the two-day event, 51 of which are in the top two management bands. In addition, four directors have participated. The programme was initially targeted at the more senior managers (those who have most influence in the organisation, not necessarily leading large teams) but latterly has been opened up to supervisors and first line managers. Many of the success stories come from participants at these levels.

There is no doubt that news of this programme spreads through ‘the grapevine’ or the ripple effect with managers hearing that it is helpful and asking whether they can attend. One difficulty, however, has been breaking down the idea that attendance on the initial two-day programme is all that is needed to become an expert coach. Some managers do not attend the follow-up and put forward a variety of reasons for not practising the skills learned, usually related to lack of time.

We made a number of small changes to the programme to help embed the learning through practice but overall the framework and most of the content has remained remarkably consistent since it was first run. Early on, there was debate about how explicit we could be about SF – it is primarily about coaching using SF techniques but this has not become an issue as more programmes were delivered. Wherever possible, we have taken opportunities to use an SF approach in other interventions – for example in performance management and in some meeting structures. This is another example of making connections ('ripples').

Evidence of the interactions spreading – the ripple effect in action

This is progress in action in terms of formal evaluation, but differences in personal interactions and assumptions have emerged as evidence of a positive shift towards the original aims. These real changes are examples of what Schein defines as happening at level 3 in cultural shifts, i.e. new responses that guide new behaviour. These examples are provided in the personal story and evaluation comments cited below.

Story 1:

A.D. is a senior Director at Tate who attended the coaching programme and took elements back to her work reality of discussing her team's role in the success of Tate. The results reveal both planned and emergent learning relevant to the individuals, the team and the organisation.

"As we've become more confident in using the miracle question, where it's positive is that it unlocks some new ways of looking at things…we can't keep ploughing the same furrow.

We had a team get together off site and posed the miracle question to see if we could find ways of resolving the problem of selling ourselves to sponsors and funders. People really tuned into it and didn't think it was barmy. The MQ is incredibly powerful.

We had storyboards and asked people to fill them with their answers to the question. Interesting to see the differences reflecting different individual personalities in the team. This was useful in itself and highlighted the fact that people see things differently.

Came up with the need for a Tate vision statement to make us distinct from all the other modern art galleries in the world. Have taken it away and are working ion it and presenting it back to the board. It has its own momentum and we are continuing to develop the ideas."

Story 2:

A collection of success stories taken from the post-programme evaluation meetings.

1. A supervisor helped a team member deal more confidently with members of the public: 'He said he didn't know what to say to customers. I started by asking him what he would like to be asked. His body position changed as he visualised this and with more coaching he is now able to talk about the advantages of membership.'

The same supervisor says she has completely changed the way she approaches her role: 'Before I was so focussed on process and the technical side but now I give people more time and let them find their own way.'

2. One manager said she used the six-monthly reviews to practise the skills and found 'nudging people out of comfort zones' very helpful. She also used a coaching approach to involve her team in deciding the location and format of the team day which previously she would have decided herself: 'This meant they had ownership and decided they wanted to focus on one particular area of our work on that day.'
3. One manager was equivocal. On the one hand, he said: 'day-to-day work stops me applying it [coaching] and thinking about it. Coaching is a slower and considered process, completely unrealistic when you're delivering.' Yet he went on to say that working with his team in a 'more collaborative' way had produced an idea (from them) that he hadn't thought of. When asked how his team had reacted to his different approach, he replied that 'they loved it –they know I want to know [what they think] and reacted well.'
4. A manager said: 'I felt more confident going into the Performance and Development Planning [appraisals] round knowing that you can allow people to release their innermost thoughts and not panic.'
5. 'Having to listen to people is hard, especially listening to pick up key words. But if you can go back and ask "why did you use that word?" …They think "wow this guy's really interested in my problem" and it really opens them up and leads to more insights. Yes it has made a difference but it's really difficult to isolate. It's a significant extra tool in my toolkit.'

These examples illustrate in part the increasing ease with which solutions-focus can now be explicitly referred to within daily Tate operations, and be both understood and respected as an approach.

In addition, the percentage of employees having a performance review, indicated by documentation being completed, has improved considerably over the last two years. (from approximately 70% to approximately 90%).

There is a definite move away from choosing training courses as the automatic and first choice to deal with a performance issue. In general, managers are generally more aware of other possible learning interventions such as coaching.

The shape of the core training programme (courses run in-house and offered to all Tate staff) has changed to reflect the growing awareness and use of coaching. For example, there is more emphasis on facilitators running small-group workshops to address needs that are relevant to the team or the organisation at that time. There is also a range of 'learning bites' (90 minute sessions on behavioural topics) that anyone can attend and which are identified as general needs through performance review. These are always designed with SF principles in mind and are facilitated or coached rather than 'trained'.

Each of these is a small step towards changing organisational culture. However, they demonstrate the *ripple effect* of doing something different. Taken together they are starting to have an effect in accelaerating a performance and development culture.

Conclusions

From the results emerging to date within Tate, the authors conclude that following (and believing in) the ripple effect as an approach has significantly helped bring about the outcomes mentioned previously.

The parallels between the elements of momentum, interaction and small development steps are all synonymous with the common principles of SF. Coupled with this the ripple effect has led the authors to conclude the following key points from Tate's experience:

– Organisations with long-serving employees need time to accept any cultural shift
– Managers can be the best publicists of the changes – just don't expect them to use your language!
– Truly listening to their adaptations and experiences, and incorporating into structured learning events such as workshops on coaching and focus groups on PDP, help spread the good news faster
– Restricting access to a programme through relevant eligibility criteria can work to your advantage in spreading rumour and ripples
– Forcing 'top down' initiatives is not the only way – taking action at the centre can generate ripples of movement in all directions, that finally alert those at the top!

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Appendix A: Speed-coaching activity and briefing

This activity is intended to consolidate coaching skills (particularly SF questioning) towards the end of a two-day development programme. In summary, the key questions they will have practised and explored immediately before this activity are:

- Scaling question
- Miracle question
- Exceptions question
- Counters question
- $5 words
- What else question

In briefing the activity it is useful to comment on the following points:

- Coaching can take time that we often do not have
- Coaching does not need to be formal; developing a coaching response can be just as useful as formal coaching, and takes far less time
- To effectively respond using a coaching approach, it is essential to have some experience of getting "in the flow" of coaching

This activity will help you develop that "flow" by immediately responding to a situation when you have only 3 minutes available to help. Participants are not expected to complete a full coaching process, but to merely respond to their colleague with effective SF (or other) coaching questions.

Have the room prepared by moving chairs and tables to the side. It is also useful to help the 'atmosphere' by ensuring people have refreshments to hand as you will be asking them to imagine they are at a relaxing social event with their colleagues.

Ask the participants to move to the centre of the room with their drink and explain that they are at a relaxed social event with all their colleagues – these are all colleagues that they like and enjoy meeting. Explain that this is their last opportunity to get the help of their colleagues in resolving any issues or progressing personal development ideas you may have. They need to make the most of the time they have at this 'event' to receive coaching from a number of their colleagues.

Ring a bell to signal the start of the event, and instruct participants to find a colleague to coach them. The trick is to quickly partner with a colleague and ask them for their help before they ask you! Whoever speaks first gets to indulge in being coached.

After 3 minutes, sound the bell and instruct participants to leave their current colleague and find another person to help them.

Repeat this 3 minute process 3-5 times.

Debrief the activity by asking:

- What worked?
- What was unexpected?
- What did you enjoy?
- How can this help your development/learning about coaching?

Conflict Management

Martina Scheinecker

SF-Conflict Management and Conflict Consulting in Organisations

Keywords: conflict management, conflict, conflict consulting, escalation, organization development, process consulting

Introduction

The generally known methods of solution-focused consulting were developed in a therapeutic context: as methods to structure the therapist-client, or patient, dialogue (De Shazer, St.1989, De Jong, P. / Berg, I.1998). In my presentation I will concentrate on the following issue:

How can the attitudes and methods of the solution-focused approach be applied to the consulting of systems (groups of people, departments, and/or companies) faced with or going through conflicts? Using a practical case from a company, it is shown which general principles of conflict management in large systems must be considered and how the use of SF methods facilitates conflict management.

A solution-focused approach to conflicts

With a solution-focused approach, conflicts can be seen as an attempt at solving a problem: The parties involved create a conflict in order to solve their problem.

When the focus is on the whole relevant system, the following questions arise: What is the purpose/benefit of the conflict? How can the system develop further by going through the conflict? What is the new thing that is trying to break through?

When the focus is on the parties involved in the conflict, the questions are: What personal interests do the parties pursue by engaging in the conflict, which of their needs do they want to satisfy by the conflict? What step in their personal development, which individual learning process, will be triggered by the conflict?

Solution-focused conflict consulting in companies

It has become obvious, that the methods of Solution-Focused consulting are suited very well to the consultancy or coaching of individuals, even without any therapeutic goals. There is a wealth of research and documentation that shows that these methods are effective in this field and yield positive results (Bamberger, G. 2001).

There is no denying that when dealing with conflicts, it is often useful and sufficient to coach one single party. But in many cases this single-party consultancy is not enough, and any consultant who wishes to effectively deal with the conflict needs to provide consultancy to the whole system involved – a group of people, several departments of an organisation, and the organisation as a whole.

When consulting systems, I see the following major differences to consulting as a therapist or coach for individuals:

1. The parties communicate in a tactical way.

When providing conflict consultancy, the consultant should be aware that the "adversary" is always present. This means that whatever a party says or does should be considered a "tactical move" which is part of his/her overall strategy to realize his/her own interests and/or push through certain changes in the entire system.

Furthermore, the consultant should know that the parties are always aware of the overall situation. If the consultant was retained, for example, by the head of a department, the issues that come up will be different from those that would have emerged if the consultant had been retained by the boss of the head of the department or by HR.

This means that consultants should keep in mind that it is possible, for example, that any hypothetic, future-oriented questions will trigger only such answers which the parties questioned feel that they can give in the particular context without exposing themselves and which will support their own strategies.

2. Some of the parties involved in the conflict may feel (more or less) pushed to take part in the consultancy.

Generally speaking, conflict management within a business enterprise is the responsibility of managers. They tend to retain a consultant if they are themselves involved in the conflict or if the conflict has escalated (Glasl, F.1990) such that the parties are no longer able to solve it internally. This means that in a business enterprise the person retaining the consultant will always be a member of the management team who is sincerely interested in solving the conflict in a structured, cooperative way. This need not hold true to the same extent for all the employees, though. It is possible that some of them take part in the process with a kind of resistance because they feel pushed to attend.

This problem is also well known by authors who describe solution-focused therapy, for example, De Jong, P. / Berg, I.1998 who distinguish between “clients”, “visitors” and "those who merely wish to complain". Consequently, the consultant should be aware that some of the parties attending the consultancy process may not be real "clients", but may merely attend out of curiosity, because they feel pushed, because they wish to express their complaints or for whatever personal reason.

3. Conflict management in larger systems requires a structured way of action

Within an organisation, conflict consultancy rarely involves work with solely 2 conflicting parties; usually, it means working with groups of various sizes. In traditional conflict consultancy it has proved successful to proceed in 3 phases: orientation phase, conflict treatment phase, consolidation phase (Glasl, F. 2004). The same applies to the solution-focused approach. The necessity of an "orientation phase" is a major difference to the classical approach in the solution-focused therapy or coaching of individuals. However, when working with complex, larger systems, the orientation phase is indispensable. It is to enable orientation on 2 sides: on the one hand, the parties to the conflict learn about the personality, role, work ethic and approach of the consultant; on the other hand, the consultant explains the relevant general conditions, rules, and communication structures for further dealing with the conflict, learns about the number and the groups of people who need to be involved in the conflict management, and – together with the parties involved – draws a picture of the conflict situation that is as conducive as possible for the further efforts at improving the conflict situation. In the solution-focused approach, it is typical at that stage to pay particular attention to the various solution scenarios of the individual parties to the conflict, what strengths and resources they see, and of what situations they are aware where they experience at least some hints or traces of the visualised solution.

Case study

I was contacted by the head of division of a big company who found himself in a difficult situation. His relationship with some of his managers and employees had come more or less to an impasse on account of serious conflicts which had developed over several years. All in all, his division comprised about 60 employees. His request for outside help was triggered by the fact that in a staff survey, those conflicts had come to broad daylight. Some comments had been that strong that it was only logical to conclude that in his relationship with some of his staff, escalation step 4 (F. Glasl, 2004) had been reached. The head of division was firmly resolved to actively address the difficult situation and to bring about a lasting improvement.

Phase 1: Job definition

A consultant can provide effective consultancy services to a company only if he/she is given a formal order by the responsible manager and if he/she establishes an "emotional contract" with all parties to the conflict; this means that in the optimum case, all parties to the conflict resolve that they wish to work with the particular consultant in bringing about an improvement of the situation. In the case at hand, this had become possible by the fact that offers of 3 different consultants had been invited and that the head of division had decided that it would not be him who would select the consultant; rather, a group of employees, ie representatives of each department, should make that decision.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the job definition phase

During the job-definition phase I had an initial meeting with the head of division and subsequently I submitted and presented an offer. My offer included my view of the status quo and, on that basis, recommendations, how much time and efforts as well as what methods should be used to deal with the conflict. In the case at hand, my view of the status quo was based on the findings of the staff survey as well as on the initial meeting with the head of division. When describing the status quo, I paid particular attention to describing problem-stabilizing and solution-generating factors in a balanced manner. In other words, I tried to make it clear what I considered resources, strengths and things that were functioning properly. And I also tried to point out what events of the past, opinions, attitudes, etc. I saw which contributed to existing conflicts so that the conflicts would continue or even deepen if nothing were done to counteract them. Judging from my experience, such a balanced look at the situation is indispensable: Focusing exclusively on the resources and the visualised solution would be stifling, the parties to the conflict would have the impression that an essential part of their reality was overlooked or neglected.

Phase 2: Orientation

My major interventions were:

- personal talks with each individual manager and member of staff as well as with the chairman of the works council,
- collective group meetings with employees from the individual departments,
- presentation of the results of such talks before a representative group, bringing about a decision on the actual course of action to be taken.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the orientation phase

During the personal talks and in the collective group meetings, a number of Solution-Focused techniques proved very helpful:

In situations of conflict, the parties involved usually have a strong wish, actually a real urge, to describe how the conflict has developed and in what respect they have been disappointed and hurt – even without explicitly being asked to do so. I have found it a productive approach to carefully listen to the parties and ask questions only to the extent that it is necessary for me to be able to clearly recognize the major bones of contention, the dynamics of the conflict and the current degree of escalation. What is really required from the consultant is to actively turn around the wheel so as to steer the parties away from such unsolicited analyzing of past problems and instead to make them focus on positive visions of the future, on their strengths and on possible approaches to a solution!

I managed to do this by asking for exceptions (how do you experience the situation, when does it feel better, be it only slightly better, etc.) as well as by posing the "miracle question" and working with rating scales. The latter with a double purpose: To instigate specific steps of – ever so small - small changes and to create a yardstick for the final evaluation of the process. I put the following question to all the people I talked to in this context: Let's suppose our joint work at the problems were successful: By what parameters would you know at a predetermined date (which is half a year later) that the culture of cooperation has improved? The replies to that question were highly specific. Let me give some examples: 1) behaviour of X in group meetings: X listens, lends an ear to the wishes of the employees, reflects on them, does not block them off right away. 2) Clear strategy regarding the new technology Y: there is internal communication about it, we stick to it for 2 years. 3) People seek contact with each other…., greet each other, and there are smiles between the "old “and the "new“ employees.

In a next step, I used those comments for my further work: "On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the positive situation that you have just described, where are you now?" The ensuing discussion about the current position and the next small steps at bringing about a change as well as the possible contribution of each individual party to the conflict yielded many positive suggestions.

Phase 3: Conflict management

In order to actually deal with the conflict, I proceeded at three levels:

Firstly, at the level of the relationships between individuals and within groups: I moderated personal meetings between the head of division and the individual managers in order to sort out their controversies and build or rebuild the mutual trust. In addition, I moderated meetings with the head of division and each department which had the following goals: Listen to the respective other party, try to understand, deal with the mutual wishes and expectations.

Secondly, at the level of organisational structures, roles and procedures: In a workshop with all managers of the department several essential measures were discussed and decided on: necessary educational measures, the need to furnish specific job descriptions of the individual employees (provide a clear and detailed description of tasks, competences, and responsibilities), development of structures enhancing cross-departmental cooperation, improvement of the process of project meetings.

And, thirdly, at the level of the technological basis of the future work: information and discussion at departmental level on the prerequisites for the successful development of a technology that was considered critical to the future success of the entire company, and discussion about the progress made in that development. As a consequence of our efforts at that level, the chief executive officer allowed further personal resources to bring about the technological innovation.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the conflict management phase

In my opinion, the strengths of the solution-focused approach, to the extent it has been developed so far, are the afore-mentioned attitudes and questioning techniques to bring about changes of views, evaluations and perspectives. Thus, they are aimed at the very heart of a conflict: A conflict escalates as a consequence of changes in the perceptions, ways of thinking and feeling and in the wishes of the parties to the conflict. To reverse that trend, de-escalation also necessitates changes at these levels. The entire spectrum of the solution-focused approach to conducting meetings/discussions/inquiries is suited to this process particularly well; in particular this refers to questions for hypothetical solutions, questions for exceptions and distinctions, work with scales, summarizing, paraphrasing, complimenting, circular questions (see, in this connection, De Jong, P. / Berg, I.1998, Proksch, Mecke, A. 2004).

Furthermore, there are a number of other time-tested measures of conflict management which I employed successfully to the case described, in particular the method of non-violent communication (M. Rosenberg, 2001), the method of "principled negotiation" (Fisher, R. et al. 2002) and role negotiation (Harrison, R. 1971).

Where issues regarding the steering and guiding of the entire division were concerned, or the further development of organizational structures, roles and processes and the clarification of the technological basis for the future work, I employed not only the solution-focused approach, but also classical tools of personnel development, organisational development and professional process consulting. (Glasl et al. 2005).

Phase 4: Evaluation

It is generally accepted that in interpersonal development processes, the *status quo*, or the "as is" situation, must be defined by all members of the system. The same holds true when looking at the progress of the development. In conflicts, both the definition of the *status quo* and the definition of the progress made are highly delicate issues and are of particular importance: It is at the very heart of conflicts that the subjective perceptions of the individual parties to the conflict differ considerably! Accordingly, it is to be expected that the subjective impressions as to whether a conflict has been coped with / handled well / or even "solved" will differ!

This makes it only logical that the progress of any efforts at solving a conflict should be evaluated with the help of a clear and generally accepted method.

In the case at hand, I resorted to rating scale questions already applied during the orientation phase. At that time, I had asked the parties, "By what parameters would you know at a predetermined date (which is half a year later) that the culture of cooperation has improved?" Around that date, I held group meetings; I asked all parties involved to describe their impressions by using a rating scale from 1 – 10 (anonymous replies, using a written list of their former comments plus rating scale*)*. Subsequently, I merged the anonymous individual comments into an overall collective picture and instigated an open dialogue within the group, focusing on the following question: What has turned for the better – stayed the same – turned for the worse – as a consequence of the measures of the past few months? Overall, that evaluation gave a convincing picture of a marked improvement of the situation: 34 % rated the situation 7 or higher, another 56% gave a rating between 4 and 7, and the remaining 10 % gave a rating lower than 4. Regarding the dialogue, many rated the developments positive, not even one participant had had the impression that the situation had deteriorated.

These evaluation meetings constituted the end of my work as conflict manager. And you can imagine that I was more than pleased when, one year later, my customer, the head of division, called me to relay another highly satisfactory feedback from the group, saying, "We have achieved very much in the past year – your efforts have indeed led to a fruitful cooperation within the group".

Summary

The attitudes and methods of solution-focused consulting have proved a considerable asset in professional conflict management, which is also reflected in a growing number of articles in the specialized literature (Kessen, St. / Troja, M. (2002), Mecke, A. 2004, Proksch, R. 1998). The solution-focused approach has shown to be highly fruitful in all situations where a change of perceptions, evaluations, feelings, and needs or goals can contribute to de-escalation. However, it should be kept in mind that the solution-focused method cannot generally be considered the onlyway for managing conflicts Depending on the degree of escalation, the type of conflict, and the special context, it will be necessary to rely on different conflict management strategies (Glasl, 2003).

In the corporate context, special conditions apply: Conflicts in institutions are usually also caused by the distribution of resources, by structures, technologies, etc. Consequently, it is often not possible to reach a "solution" by resorting exclusively to the instrument of dialogue in order to bring about a change of perceptions, evaluations and feelings of the persons involved. In addition, it will be necessary to conduct negotiations, work out agreements and make decisions in order to bring about a lasting change or to achieve that the entire system makes that step in its development the necessity of which was pointed out by the conflict.

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The SySt-Model of the Solution Focus

An example of a Solution Geometric Interview with conflict parties in an organisation

Keywords: Systemic structural constellations, SySt, SySt-Model, principles of solution focus, Solution Geometric Interview, transverbal language

Summary:

In this article a new method is presented which allows a client to

- physically experience the parts of a solution as determined by the miracle question
- experience the perspectives of other people (groups of people)
- go through the conflict situations in an as-if-form
- enter into a dialogue with the conflict partners.

By changing perspectives, an attitude of multidirectional partiality can be experienced in one´s own body. The method of the Solution Geometric Interview, a form of Systemic Structural Constellation (SySt) , permits a change in the perspectives of the conflict partners and enhances their esteem for one another. Thus an understanding for one another is generated, or as Steve de Shazer said: we find more useful forms of misunderstanding. This method helps to initiate solutions and to discover the first steps towards the miracle.

The SySt-Model

The Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt) developed by the author and Matthias Varga von Kibéd are seen by us as a form of language, the *transverbal language*, spoken not by a single person, but by a group of persons. This language combines and goes beyond both of verbal and transverbal language. The basis of this language is the *representative perception* (see below). The persons in the constellation are symbols of aspects, for example elements of the original system. They are arranged in the room in a way which seems fitting for the client [1].

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[1] I am using the word `client` here since the notion `customer` in the solution focused approach describes a specific category of interaction between consultant and the person he/she is working with.

In such an arrangement, therefore, the persons become symbols of the elements of the system which the client has a question about. Thus the Persons become representatives of the aspects of the original system. The differences in their bodily perception represent differences in the simulated system. This type of perception we call representative perception, since the bodily perceptions of the persons in the constellation are not related to differences in their own lives, but primarily to differences in the elements of the original system they represent. The body of the representatives serves as an organ of perception for aspects of the simulated system.

The transverbal language is spoken by the representatives in interaction with the client. The transverbal language shows itself in the verbal utterances of the representatives and relates to differences in their bodily perception.

The goal of this kind of group simulation is to "reconstellate" by repositioning the representatives in such a way that the constellation resembles more closely the client's goal. What the client´s goal is we discover by her answers to the miracle question in the interview before the beginning of the constellation. Interventions during the SySt are positioning (putting representatives in new places and adding representatives), process work (for example ritual dialogues between representatives and other forms of rituals) and tests. These interventions can be seen as an explorative action for the simulated system. This helps to generate new ideas for next steps in the original system.

At the end the client follows in the footsteps of her representative in the solution picture and experiences how it feels for her now to see the elements of the constellation being related to one another in a new way. The solution picture in the SySt correlates to the answers to the miracle question in the Solution-Focused interview. It symbolizes a sudden change. It gives the client a more intense bodily experience than the experience of the miracle question in the Solution-Focused interview. The transfer of the effects of a SySt-solution picture into everyday life is analoguous to a step by step change und can be compared to the work with scaling questions in the Solution-Focused approach.

Thousands of constellations supported the thesis that changes in the constellated system enhance changes in the original system, even if the clients are not part of the original system, but rather are connected with it only as consultants, mediators, supervisors or therapists.

This description may sound somewhat out of the ordinary to the reader who is not familiar with group simulation methods, as for example psychodrama (Moreno), soziometry (Moreno)[1] and sculpturing (Virginia Satir). It may sound astonishing that persons can perceive in some way changes in a different system without being in-

[1] For the solution focused work an interesting combination of sociometric methods with the solution focused methodology was developed by Paul Jackson in his "spatial sorting" approach..

formed about this system and that they are thereby able to enhance changes within this system. For twenty years we have been working with constellations and related approaches and we have made such observations again and again. Therefore, we use this method even though we are not able to give a full explanation [1] for the effects of constellation work.

At this point I suggest a thought experiment to establish a context in which representative perception would be quite a normal phenomenon. Usually we suppose that individuals are separated from one another and therefore ask the question “How is it possible that information is transferred from one person to the other?”. Let us suppose we are not separate individuals but connected, then we might ask: “How come that we do not know of something?” This perspective fits the experience of representative perception.

The *metaphor of separation* as well as the *metaphor of connection* are useful in order to understand different experiences. Therefore I suggest looking with both eyes simultaneously at the world, so that we get a multi-dimensional picture related to separation and connection – in analogy to Viktor Frankl’s metaphor of “seeing with both eyes” which he proposed for the solution of paradoxes. The separate contradicting pictures of both eyes simultaneously generate input in the brain and are reconstructed by the brain into a consistent picture with a new dimension: the spatial perception of depth.

The SySt-Model of the Solution Focus: Solution-Focused SySt

A special group of SySt are the Solution-Focused SySt. They were developed by the author to compare SySt with Solution-Focused interviews. They are a combination of SySt and Solution-Focused interviews. In principle there are two forms of combination:

1. Translation of parts of the Solution-Focused interview into SySt

Solution Constellation:

Here parts of the Solution-Focused interview (as focus, goal, miracle, context of miracle, exceptions) are constellated with persons in the room.

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[1] Some examples of early systematic research into the effective principles of SySt® are to be found in the books of G. Höppner und P. Schlötter.

Goal Approximation Constellation:

In this format, a timeline is added to the parts of the Solution Constellation. The work on the timeline is correlated to the working with scales in the Solution-Focused interview.

12 Squares Constellation:

In this format, the Goal Approximation Constellation is supplemented by making a difference between the internal and the external context. The coordinate of time (past, present, near future (before the miracle) and broad future (after the miracle)) and the coordinate of context (with internal context, border and external context) generate an area that is divided into twelve squares. The other representatives (focus, goal, miracle, context of miracle and exceptions) are arranged by the client on these squares.

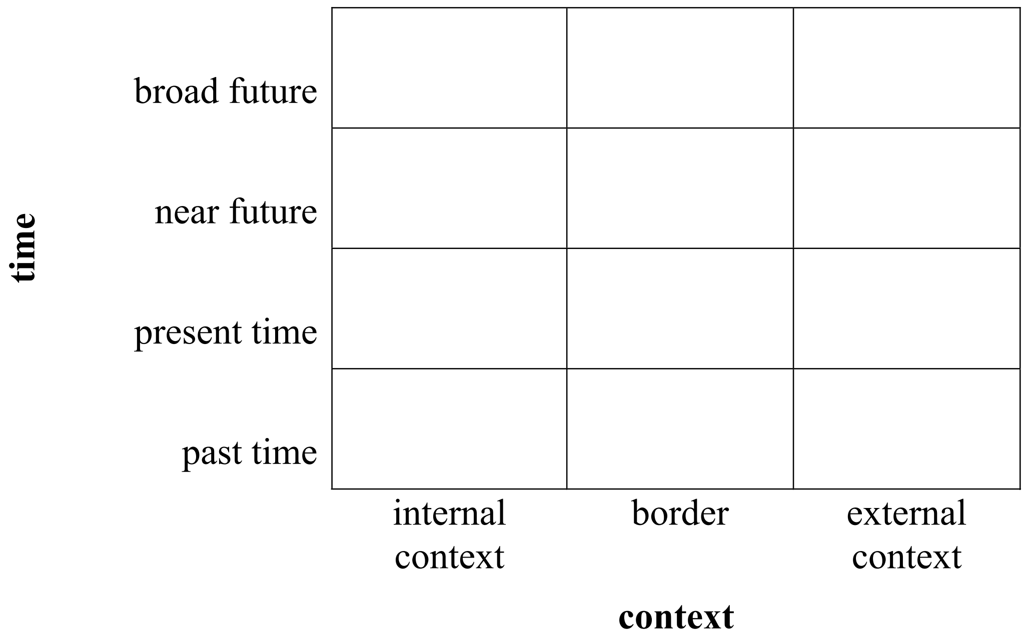

Fig.: Twelve square schema

In all these formats the parts of solution gained by the Solution-Focused interview are arranged and re-arranged in the room, missing parts are added and the relationship between different parts is altered with the aim of sufficiently improving the situation of the representatives. The advantage of such a SySt in comparison with the Solution-Focused interview lies in

- the stronger intensity of experience
- the possibility of systematic testing actions and
- the enhanced transparency of the solution.

With the help of the timeline und the twelve square table, parts of the solution and the problem can be sorted in a way which makes sense.

2. Simultaneity of SySt and the Solution-Focused interview: The Solution Geometric Interview

In this format the representatives of the original system are constellated in the space and are asked by the facilitator about which differences they are experiencing. Afterwards they sit down on chairs in the constellated arrangement. The facilitator also takes a seat in the round of the representatives and conducts a Solution-Focused interview with them. Especially the miracle question is very useful here. Also all the other Solution-Focused questions can be asked, as questions for exceptions and scaling questions. The Solution Geometric Interview is a Solution-Focused interview with constellated representatives.

The Solution Geometric Interview becomes part of the representative perception.

The representatives, who are not informed about the issues at stake in the original system, find their answers to the Solution-Focused questions not by thinking, but by perception and by noticing what is coming into their minds. They let themselves be surprised by which words they discover, which pictures or other forms of perception might appear. The language here becomes part of the perception. The organ for this perception is the body of the persons in the constellation.

Solution-Focused interview and Solution Geometric Interview differ also in the answers given in them. The original persons of the simulated system describe the answers of the representatives as follows:

- The answer is fitting. Before, I couldn´t remember this point.
- That is a gut feeling. Up to now I myself hadn´t found words for that feeling.
- In some way I knew that, but I couldn´t put it in words.
- I didn´t know that I felt so connected with …(person, to which client is loyal) … so that I was not able to take steps towards my solution.
- The constellation showed me I was in a dilemma between being connected to … (person, to which the client behaves loyal) … and taking steps in the direction of the solution.
- That is literally what Mr. /Mrs. X said.

The Solution Geometric Interview adds some new and sometimes forgotten aspect to the Solution-Focused interview. Therefore it is a useful supplement to the Solution-Focused interview.

Each Solution Geometric Interview begins with a Solution-Focused interview, so that both forms of interview are easy to compare. The differences between both methods are described by clients in the following way:

- My experience during the SySt was much more vivid than during the Solution-Focused interview. It is as if the miracle had already happened.
- I got many new ideas with the help of the Solution-Focused interview. The SySt has added to them some important points.
- In the SySt I could act myself. For instance, I could get into dialogue with …(persons of the context of the miracle)… That was very helpful.
- The SySt has clarified a lot for me. The experience was much stronger and more intense than during the Solution-Focused interview.

What are the criteria of the solution focus?

How does the solution focus manifest itself in the SFT and in the SySt-Model?

Both methods, the verbal technique of the SFT and the constellation work of the SySt-model, can be used in a Solution-Focused way. In this sense I understand the solution focus as a more general concept which can be used in different ways. What are the criteria of the solution focus?

These are the criteria of the solution focus as I see them. I will explain how to identify them in the SFT and in the SySt-Model:

1. The solution is independent from the problem. Therefore an analysis of the problem is not generally necessary for the solution.

SFT: With the help of the miracle question und the questions for exceptions we are able to step into the realm ot the solution without knowing the problem of the client. It is sufficient to know in which direction she wants to go.

SySt-Model: In principle we can do the constellation without knowing in detail the problem of the client. It is sufficient to know which elements belong to the original system (the state of which should be changed).

2. You can find the solution by changing perspective. Therefore the world as a whole is changing, not only a part of it.

SFT: The miracle question for instance is not a normal question with an answer, but it is a trance induction for entering into the world of solutions. The client is entering a new world: Everything is different here, even if the facts are not changed.

Before giving answers the client has already begun to enter into the new world. This change is a sort of reversal: the perspective shifts from the past and discovers the possibilities of the future. The perspective leaves the problem and reaches out for the solution.

SySt-Model: The answer to the miracle question corresponds to the solution picture of a SySt, which the client enters at the end of constellation work. Like the answers to the miracle question the solution picture can be seen as the beginning of something (and not as the end of something). The relationship between the elements of the constellated system has changed, the elements remain the same (New elements can be added, but these belonged to the system already before the constellation work began). There is a change in the structure, the way the elements connect with each other, usually due to a prior change ot the form, - the form being - in the sence of Wittgenstein - space of possibilities for change in the structure. Thus, for example, the representative of the client can be freed by ritual interventions from her fixation on an obstacle or a trauma, which diminished her space of possibilities. Afterwards she can change her position and look in the direction of her goal.

3. The solution starts with a sudden change. This change starts within the person and not just in the outside world.

SFT: The miracle happens suddenly in the night. This is shown by a very different way of experiencing, new actions and a new style of thinking of the client. If she reports that the world around her has changed, the facilitator continues asking until she is mentioning things, which are independent from a change in her surroundings. Now the client is really entering her world of solutions.

SySt-Model: A sudden change is initiated in the constellation work by

- changing the place of the representatives: The representatives, who cannot see each other, can be repositioned, so that they suddenly get into contact.
- adding forgotten elements of the system: The addition of such forgotten elements can suddenly change the whole system of relationships of the elements.
- Rituals for the removal of context overlaps: When there was a confusion (i.e. the client acts as if she had confused herself with somebody else instead) [1] the representative of the client can go towards the representative of the person with which this confusion occurred. When she has then reached a position immediately opposite of that other person(´s representative) often feeling a specially deep connection or fascination in that moment (going into a sort of deep confluence or "identification"), she is turned around softly but in a quite sudden way by the facilitator. Thereby a change towards being "fully with herself" is effected. Her whole world suddenly starts to change.

[1] There can be e.g. confusions with an earlier age of oneself , or with past experiences and persons we feel very connected with

– Entrance of the client into the solution picture. Here the client makes the shift from a state in which she is dissociated from the solution picture towards a state in which she is associated with it. [1]

4.The solution of the problem manifests itself in the way it vanishes; likewise, blockades dissolve and processes become fluid again and make new actions possible.

SFT: In the Solution-Focused interview the client forgets more and more about her problems, she mentions them less often. In the solution the facts connect in a different way. Their former way of being in a problematic relationship with each other ends without trace, just as a triangle vanishes when the three points are arranged on a line (example from Wittgenstein).

SySt-Model: In constellation work the relationship between the elements is changed by repositioning. The problem consists in the elements being connected with each other in a certain way. By process work blockades are transformed into processes.

5. Sudden change gives us hope, continuous change enables action. It is important to combine these two forms of change (Principle of Transcontinuity (Luc Isebaert)).

SFT: A sudden change takes place in the miracle question, a continuous change we

SySt-Model: A sudden change takes place in repositioning representatives and in the rituals for the removal of a context overlap. A continuous change is characteristic for most of process work, of the work with the timeline and in the use of seeding ideas for actions.

6. With the notion of "solution" there is no specific connection with a content, but a dissolution of the problem and a beginning of something new. The solution gives an experience of a reversal and is something basic – not every time something different. In this respect there is only one solution, out of which the variety of the special single solutions flows.

SFT: The client is usually asked the miracle question only once, because there is only *one* miracle. In the following sessions the miracle can be remembered, for example by working with scales, "10" standing for the miracle. The miracle is a new context, within which everything is changed- not a program for a different content.

SySt-Model: In the SySt there is no concept of content for the solution. The solution can be found in the last picture of the constellation and is perceived as the beginning of something. In the following session the client can get supplements to the solution by working further on it in the transverbal language. These supplements are not new

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[1] This sudden process can be mitigated in SySt-work by the so-called Alter-Ego-Method.

solutions, but the expansion of this *one* solution and new aspects of it. To avoid interpretations, we work with differences:

- For example we ask the representatives for change by questions like “is it now better or worse or equal or different for you?” like Steve de Shazer said: “We can understand what “better” means without knowing what “good” means”.
- We understand our interventions as questions to the constellated system. They are for testing, and are intended as proposals, not as orders.
- The work with representatives on the timeline can be seen as embodied scale work.

7. In the space of the solution there opens up a space of possibilities, which have not been realised up to the present. By this opening the possibilities of choice are enlarged for the client.

SFT: The miracle question is a hypothetical question, which is started in hypothetical mode (*suppose* in the following night there would happen a miracle …) and mostly ends in the descriptive mode (…. How do you notice that the miracle *has happened*?). By this a space of possibilities opens which the client experiences as real. By experiencing these new possibilities (the miracle question can be answered by the client only if the client experiences the miracle), they become facts for the client, which in every day life the client can realise.

SySt-Model: The experience of the miracle gets enlarged by constellation work. The client experiences the new possibilities in her own body. The possibility of trial actions transforms the possibilities into realities for the client. The interventions of the facilitator are questions beginning with “Suppose …”, the answers of the representatives show the effects of the interventions the facilitator has made. The reactions of the client verify or falsify what happened in the constellation. The reactions of the client transform the offers connected with the constellation work into descriptions. The world of the client opens up und gives more possibilities of choice to her.

8.There is a change in ascribing meaning to the facts by the client. The facts themselves do not change, but they can be changed by different behaviours of the client or of persons belonging to the system.

SFT: Elements or facts of the problem, like persons, material objects, etc. also appear in the miracle - and if not, the facilitator asks the client how she will get along with these givens after the miracle has happened. By this new way of dealing with the facts and material things (which also comprises a new way to relate to what is given) the whole system for the client is changed. She now perceives the world as different. By this, for instance, a symptom can be transformed into a helpful signal or a conflict into a learning situation. The miracle creates a new frame for the world, in which new possibilities grow. Thereby the whole situation is put into a new frame (reframing).

SySt-Model: In the SySt the elements (for example persons, material things, abstract concepts, like goals, miracles and exceptions) of the original system are arranged in the space with persons as representatives. The special arrangement reflects the relationship between them. The solution appears in a new arrangement of the elements, which now have more suitable relationships to one another. By this the client gets new choices for actions. The elements remain the same, none of them are excluded from the system. Thus a transformation of the given is effected.

9. Because the notion of solution is not connected to any content, the facilitator has to abstain from interpretations, or in other words, the facilitator has to abandon all her concepts as far as possible. Regarding the contents which the client mentions, the facilitator enters the world of the client or the world of the original system. The clients do not have to adapt to the world of the facilitator when speaking about content.

SFT: In the dialogue with the client the facilitator only asks questions, makes appreciative observations and proposals for experiments. The effects of this are judged by the client herself. By this the facilitator adds no new content to the process.

SySt-Model: The interventions of the facilitator are meant as questions to the system, the answers of the representatives show possibilities. It is important that the facilitator has no previously fixed concepts for the solution, but lets herself be surprised by the structural constellation.

Case Example: A Situation of Stalemate within an Organisation

Original Situation

In a business organisation we find a stalemate between a project team, the next level of management (the heads of the department, the deputy head of the department) and the board of executive directors. The team was given the task by the board of directors to develop a new model of customer care for a specific group of customers. The deputy head of this department is an expert on customer care for this specific group. He proposed his model for customer care to the board of executive directors. This proposal was accepted and made obligatory for everybody concerned in this company. The team that had in the meantime worked out its own concept for customer care was passed over. Up to the moment of intervention the team was obstructing the implementation of the deputy head´s concept, declaring his ideas “unethical”. One member of the team is a former head of department. She had stepped down from that post and is now working as a team member again.

The client for the constellation is a member of the project team. Her aim is to get new ideas for action. The stalemate situation has been going on for seven months already. Neither the client nor the other conflict parties have any ideas about how a solution for this might be worked out. If no solution is found the board of executive directors has threatened to fire some members.

The author as facilitator of the constellation guided the client to choose and constellate representatives for the conflict parties in question from inside and outside the team :

Inside the team:

- F: the focus as the representative for the client herself
- TO: team members unconditionally opposed to the new concept
- TN: team members neutral with regard to the new concept
- one specific important team member M
- FM: the former head of department, who stepped down (FM)

Outside the team:

- the heads of department
- the deputy head of department
- the board of executive directors

These representatives were constellated by the client, interviewed about their reactions by the facilitator and given chairs to sit down on the pattern of the constellated arrangement. The facilitator joined them by taking a chair within the constellated group of representatives. She then interviewed them with a Solution-Focused group interview by putting the miracle question simultaneously to the whole constellated group of representatives. The interview delivered the *following results*:

1. Everybody concerned was interested in a dialogue of all parties and also interested in finding a solution.

2. The conflict did not seem to be on the level of opposing concepts, but on the level of interpersonal relationships. The original topic about the question of ethical appropriateness of the new concept was transformed into the topic "How to avoid face loss?". Quite often, during the Solution Geometric Interview new topics appear and old ones are transformed or even vanish, thus giving access to new solutions.

3. The deputy head can avoid loss of face if his new concept is in the future no longer considered unethical by the team, i.e. if this judgement is taken back by them.

4. FM (the former head of department) was willing to direct this dialogue. She had an idea of how to act according to the deputy head's concept without vio-

lating her ethical principles. In the later course of the Solution Geometric Interview it was seen to be important that she restricted her influence on the dialogue to a facilitating function, refraining from introducing her own ideas on the subject matter, thus avoiding any possible loss of face on the side of the heads of department.

5. The heads of department were willing to accept FM to have this special function in the dialogue only if she asks the heads of the department for permission.

6. As the present heads of department feel responsible for the direction of the dialogue themselves, this shift in responsibility is only possible if permission is given for it by the board of executive directors.

7. The board of executive directors gives permission only if the present management of the department takes the initiative in this process by asking FM to facilitate the process.

8. Even those team members who were opposed to the new concept are ready to engage in a dialogue if the customers are seen as the center of the future concept, i.e. if the perspectives of the customers are better taken into account .

9. The deputy head wishes to lead a dialogue with all concerned. At the same time he fears a possible loss of face. This loss of face can be avoided by constructing a new reading of his concept that no longer is inconsistent with the ethical requirements of the team members.

10. Thus, a step by step agenda for this solution design gradually takes shape:

- The client has a good relationship with FM and can explain to her the schedule for a solution process.
- FM can propose to the heads of department to call a session for a joint dialogue and ask the heads of department for permission to facilitate this process. Thus the heads of department are relieved of a burden without any concurrent loss of face.
- The heads of department can propose these ideas as their own to the board of executive directors, who will be relieved in their turn to see that something constructive is being done.
- As long as this proposal comes from the heads of department they can be perceived as strong by the board of directors. Thus, the agreement of the board of directors to the proposal is more likely.
- In contact with the team the client can suggest to replace the judgement of "unethical" by the concept of "still in need of further elucidation". In this way the deputy head will be able to take part in the dialogue without any

threat of loss of face and at the same time allow the concept to be discussed in the open.

- It may be helpful to symbolically reposition the customers in the center of the discussion by taking into careful consideration their wishes and ideas. Thus everybody can keep their face and the momentum for positive action is renewed.

The aim of the client was fulfilled already after the Solution Geometric Interview: She had new ideas and approaches about the type and order of her next steps, especially for taking up again the dialogue with her team and FM. By this the stalemate was stopped and it opened up new possibilities for her. The answers of the representatives to the miracle question were quite fitting and pragmatic from her point of view. The representatives´ ways of expressing themselves and their objections fitted exactly the client´s view of the original persons.

The Solution Geometric Interview offers as a special advantage the possibility of including persons from the system who are not physically present. The representatives express the specific perspectives of the original persons or groups of persons (conflict parties) they stand for. It is easier for them to describe the conflict from their different special perspectives than it might have been for the original members. Often totally new aspects are brought up that are perceived as fitting to the real system by the client, which she herself might not have been able to express. Often, behaviour that up to now seemed strange suddenly becomes understandable. Belonging to the system, the client can evaluate the degree of fittingness of the answers given in the Solution Geometric Interview. Thus, ideas can be generated and at the same time the borders against pure imagination and fantasy are still safeguarded.

Conclusions

1. The principle of solution focus can be transferred from verbal language into the transverbal language of the Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt).
2. Absent conflict partners can (e.g. during the Solution Geometric Interview) be replaced by representatives.
3. Forgotten elements of the conflict system and forgotten context factors can be discovered by means of the transverbal language of Systemic Structural Constellation work (SySt).
4. The perspectives of the conflict partners can be shown by SySt in a form where the representatives experience the different perspectives within their own body. This makes it possible to appreciate the conflict partners, to see them in a new way and to get information about formerly not understandable perspectives.
5. Dialogues between conflict partners can be acted out by changing the perspective in a lively “as-if”-form.

6. Both forms of the miracle question, in the Solution Geometric Interview and in the Solution-Focused dialogue, can supplement each other. In different way, they create ideas for next steps.
7. The Solution Geometric Interview gives a higher degree of proximity with the perceptional process, a stronger "embodiment" of the processes as the Solution-Focused interview. Of course the Solution-Focused interview will still be sufficient in many cases, but its reach is greatly enlarged by the Solution Geometric Interview.

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Solution-Focused Peace Building

Keywords: Solution Focus, peace building, conflict resolution

"I despise everything which merely instructs me without increasing or immediately enlivening my activity."
Goethe, quoted in Nietzsche, 1980.

Introduction

During my training in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy at the Korzybski Institute in Bruges, I started working in the field of peace building. Firstly, as a project manager of the non governmental organisation Field Diplomacy Initiative, and later as a researcher at the Centre for Peace Research of the University of Leuven. It struck me that a lot of patterns of the therapist - client relationship were echoed in the relationship between the peace builders and their ‘target groups’. That is when I started to explore how Solution Focus could make a difference in the way we usually deal with conflicts.

When asked if Solution Focus could also work in the field of peace building, Steve de Shazer would probably have answered with a dry: “I don’t know.” The question is misleading, in fact nonsensical. Firstly, peace building refers to a multitude of activities as preventive diplomacy, peace enforcement, state building, democratisation, reconciliation and so on. Asking if something works in this domain is like asking whether it is useful to be a good team player when playing sports. This does not exclude an affirmative answer, but one could probably come up with a number of sports in which team skills are less relevant. Secondly, Solution Focus doesn’t “work” as such. It requires somebody “to act skilfully to make something happen” (McKergow, 2006). This implies that Solution Focus can only be evaluated in a particular intervention of a particular person. What follows is not a blueprint on how to end conflicts in a Solution-Focused way, but an account of experiences in the field of peace building in which the Solution Focus helped to make a difference.

How I learnt to stop worrying and love conflicts

As a young boy I was disturbed by the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, the brutal images of the first Intifada, the struggle against Apartheid, the troubles in Northern Ireland, and the Iran-Iraq war. As a researcher I learnt to tame the complexity of conflicts in elaborate conflict analyses and to arrest their fleeting dynamics in historical overviews. This lead to an impressive yield of knowledge on actors, issues, facts, trigger and root causes, prognoses and outcome assessments. Such material is primed to be processed in comparative studies, as a means to garner more in-depth knowledge of existing conflicts and even of conflicts in general. However, it takes a lot of time and buoyancy to find useful, actionable knowledge in this pool of knowledge. As a Solution-Focused practitioner I started to look at 'conflicts' in a different way. Instead of trying to acquire an understanding of a particular conflict, I focused my attention on concrete exceptions and resources.

In a course in conflict analysis in Birmingham we were asked to analyse the Israel-Palestine conflict. After several hours of mapping out the power balance of the opponents, listing issues and drawing timelines, our morale had plunged below zero. Some felt delighted that they worked in Sierra Leone, Bosnia or Ghana. Others concluded that the conflict obviously had every right to exist and would probably never be resolved. One peace builder even suggested to drop the big one. A conflict analysis offers only a partial view of the situation. After a break I asked our Palestinian trainer to expand our analysis with an overview of peace building initiatives, to map exceptions to the conflict and list aspirations and resources of local peace organisations. The perception of the reality changed. It dawned to us that there are several pathways to peace.

This is how I learnt to stop worrying and love conflict. By adjusting our focus, the gloomy reality of conflict dissipates into a world of possibilities, partial solutions, populated with smaller and bigger Nelson Mandela's which are making a difference long before the experts agree on what the conflict is all about. The class of peace is definitely different from the class of conflicts.

Conflicts in Northern Ireland

Conflict analyses are central in peace research because it is the ground on which experts base their predictions and recommendations. However, the value of such analyses rests on the assumption that there is *one* reality which can be understood and described in an objective manner. It doesn't take a Wittgenstein or Derrida to point out that this is impossible. Based on 19 interviews in London-Derry and Belfast, I concluded that there were at least 19 different views on the conflict and an equal number of meanings of the word "peace". Peace agreements are supposed to be all-embracing, but are usually based on an agreement between top political leaders. They co-construct their vision of the reality and decide what measures should be taken to guarantee peace. The people that are affected by their decisions, however, often feel that their concerns and hopes are not acknowledged for in the agreement and its implementation. This was probably why the Oslo Peace Agreement for the conflict in Israel failed. I am not arguing against peace agreements, but plead for more peace plans which would acknowledge the concerns and hopes of others than the top political and military leadership.

Kosovo

In 2002 Field Diplomacy Initiative received funding from the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to set up a workshop on peace building leadership in Kosovo. In the first phase of this project 30 local and international leaders were interviewed in a Solution-Focused way. I asked them about their future perfect, about the successes they were able to achieve, how they coped with the situation, what small steps could be made, etc. The atmosphere that was created during these talks was one of resignation towards the limits they encountered in their work, satisfaction about the things they had managed to achieve despite all the difficulties, and mild optimism, because realistic goals were discussed. After each interview I invited them to our workshop on leadership. I asked them what needed to happen there so that they would say that this had been a fruitful meeting. A lot of them said the mere possibility of meeting each other in an informal setting would be useful. Some local leaders told me that the meeting would be successful if they had had the feeling that they were listened to by those who normally tell them what to do. The workshop itself was not set up as a class in peace building leadership but as a reflective team session where the participants had the opportunity to share their best practices, and to discover that different resources and possibilities are available on different levels and sectors of the society. One of the important things we learnt was that a lot of the local peace potential remains unused by the international community (i.e. the UN Mission in Kosovo, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the EU). The international community would probably be more effective if they would tap into these local resources for peace building.

Actionable knowledge

In an attempt to see how peace and conflict research could generate more useful knowledge, we set up an experiment at the University of Leuven. Together with the students of the Master in Conflict and Sustainable Peace, we ran a research project on the African Great Lakes conflict, during the second semester of 2005-06. In the first phase of our project, our students received training in Solution-Focused interviewing from Kirsten Dierolf. After that, six small groups of three students each were assigned to work together with an expert from one of the following disciplines: human rights law, international cooperation, agriculture, political economy, local civil society, and democratisation. The experts were invited to give a short presentation, after which our students interviewed them in a Solution-Focused way. The goal of these interviews, and of this research project as a whole was to generate ‘actionable knowledge’, knowledge that would be able to make a difference in the field. Both the students and the experts reported that they were impressed by the fact that the knowledge generated through the interviews had a different effect on them, compared to the knowledge which was presented in the lectures.

Solution-Focused Peace Building in Antwerp – Belgium

In February 2005 a five day workshop was organised in Antwerp for a group of 25 people. They were all active as peace builders and were working in various countries and in different fields such as the military, research organisations, international and local NGO's, and politics. The aim of the workshop was to find out how they manage to make a difference in the conflicts they were working, and how they (could) profit from what we called "transtrack" cooperation. A distinction between three tracks is usually made in peace research: track I stands for top political and military leadership, track II refers to civil society leadership and track III is the leadership which can be found on grassroot level. We found that a lot of successful peace building initiatives were indeed based on transtrack cooperation and that the learning process of peace building could be stimulated by providing a safe haven in which people can meet and build trust, and where they can share their resources in order to develop shared goals.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The following step was to take this way of working to the terrain and to work with people that are involved in the same conflict. The first attempt to conduct such Solution-Focused Peace Building Workshops was made in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This African Great Lakes Region is witness to the deadliest wars since the Second World War. The wars started with the genocides in Burundi and Rwanda and affected the whole region, causing over 6 million casualties since 1994. Up until now, The Lancet reports, 1,200 people die each day as a result of the ongoing conflict.

Instead of drafting a new project for this affected region from their desks in Antwerp and Utrecht, two representatives of Pax Christi Flanders and the Netherlands and myself decided to ask the local civil society leaders to design their own project. In doing so we wanted to escape the much heard complaint of locals against international initiatives: "You come here with your projects and leave us in our misery." Three workshops were organised with civil society representatives in Bunia (Ituri), Butembo and Goma (North Kivu). Based on the reteaming methodology of Ben Furman (Furman, 2005) we took the following steps in our workshops. I will give the example of the workshop in Goma, where 15 leaders from 11 different civil society organisations came together during one morning. First we asked them to work in small groups to envision their peaceful and stable region in the future. These ideas were then presented in a plenary session in order to share them with the other participants. We explored what advantages this future would entail for the citizens of that region. We asked them about what they were already doing to reach that future and what successes they had booked in the recent past. Then we inquired how they could do more of what worked, and which small steps they could take to reach their envisioned future. This was the basis for a new project proposal which they drafted on the spot. Finally the participants decided which organisations would realise this project. They proposed a network of five organisations which were selected on the following criteria. First: the extra work should under no account jeopardise the current activities of the organisation. Second: the organisations which would be working together in a network should already have an ethnically mixed staff.

Although there were different parties involved which did not share the same vision of the conflict, it was relatively easy to draft an original project proposal in these sessions. We also realised that there were a lot of elements in it which would probably never be considered as relevant by external experts. For instance, setting up support groups for bewitched children. Meanwhile, Pax Christi has submitted their project proposals to the Belgian and Dutch governments. The Belgian government already agreed to fund the projects in Butembo and Goma.

Conclusion

Compared to therapy and consultancy, peace building obviously deals with different kinds of problems (disarmament, negotiation a peace agreement, development, democratisation, return of refugees, etc.) and affects more people. The complexity of human systems is probably more tangible in conflict settings as compared to therapeutic or consultative settings. The learning curve of a society is slower than that of a family or a company. But, whether working in a therapeutic, management or conflict setting, each intervention is based on an interaction between people. And in each setting you can experience the usefulness of shifting from problem talk to solution talk. Solution-Focused peace building is about finding out what works, despite the difficulties these people face. It's about respect for the partners you are working with, and being careful not to pull them towards your own solution. It's about co-constructing a vision of the solution, and finding ways to make concrete steps in that direction.

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Project Management

Robert Buehler

The role of SF within complex change projects - 'Coachulting'

Keywords: project processes, project management, project performance, IT-related projects, complex projects, change projects, assessment, coaching, consulting, training, Solution-Focused project management, re-teaming, twin star, stake holder

Introduction

In the world of IT and other complex change projects, the failure rate remains depressingly high compared to projects in more traditional businesses. On the one hand this has to do with the challenging nature of IT and of complex changes per se. On the other hand it is because progress within such projects is difficult to measure. Most things are virtual, soft and intangible.

Most failure is due to how such projects get started. In too many projects the set-up is not done carefully enough and very often the only way to measure progress is by asking people about it. This involves too much guesswork, something that many engineers are not good at. The resulting delays, poor quality and cost overruns have become pandemic in the industry.

To improve this situation there needs to be awareness that it is the people involved who are the key to the success of a project. Each stakeholder has a certain role to play (see Figure 1) but behind each of these roles are human beings with knowledge, skills and talents. The talents play a much greater role in this game. It is of great benefit to be aware of one another's talents in any project.

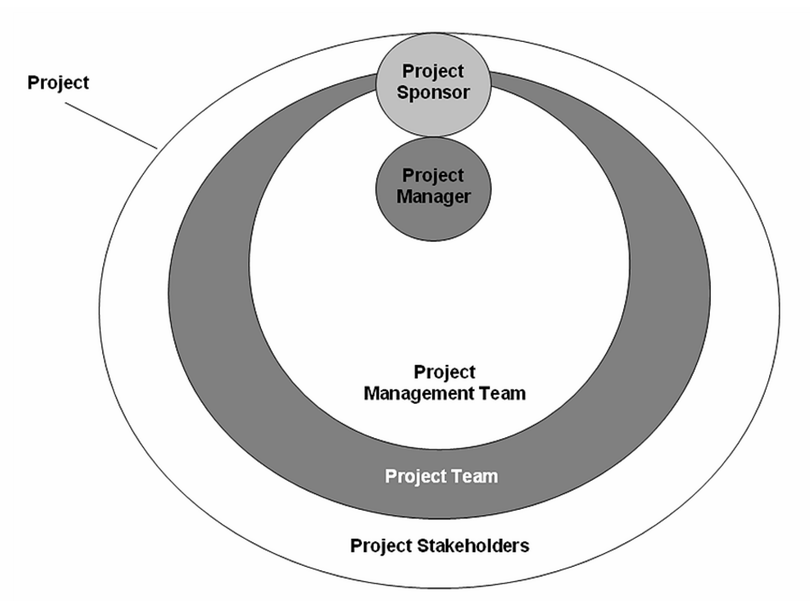

Figure 1: Project stakeholders of a project according to PMI (Project Management Institute – www.pmi.org)

Instead of a problem focused behaviour and culture, a Solution-Focused approach unlocks the potential needed to succeed.

This article describes and explains a Solution-Focused approach which permits easier achievement of goals in challenging change projects. Called 'Coachulting', which is a combination of Coaching, Consulting and Training, it is an efficient way to substantially raise the success rate of such projects. That is why Coachulting is the "success insurance" for IT-related or complex change projects.

Why do IT-related or complex projects fail?

To start a sentence with a "why"-Question is a problem oriented approach. Very often this question is asked mid-way through a project or even when a project has already failed and all too rarely at the start of a project (and in a SF-way). Yet an expert in complex change projects will tell you: "Show me how you start the project and I will tell you how it will end"! We should therefore ask at the very beginning: "What will make this project successful?".

How many Projects involving complex change end in success[1]?

– 30% are successful	(➔ > 80% of scope, on time, on budget)
– 40% need further improvements	(➔ > 60% of scope, max. 30% behind schedule, max. 25% over budget)
– 30% complete failure	(➔ <60% of scope, project failed or was stopped)

Some reasons for failure:

- Unclear what the benefit is and an unclear start to the project
- Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders
- Lack of support from Top-Management
- Lack of Sparring Partner for leaders
- Potential of teams and members not taken into account (only know-how, skills)
- Lack of skills and proven approach to project and risk management
- Moving targets force scope to shift around

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1 Source: MoC-Study by ILOI in cooperation with IfB, Hochschule St. Gallen, 1998

– Dependency on limited key-resources
– Project management job, when added to a manager's existing workload is perceived as a punishment
– Lack of clear link between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.
– Too little attention to breaking development and implementation into manageable steps.

Mostly the cause of failure in such ventures can be traced to the very beginning. Too little attention is paid to the people involved: who they are (as a personality and not just as a possessor of know-how, skills, function and position) and what their needs are. Projects have different project process-phases and each of these needs a different focus in supporting the project team and people involved.

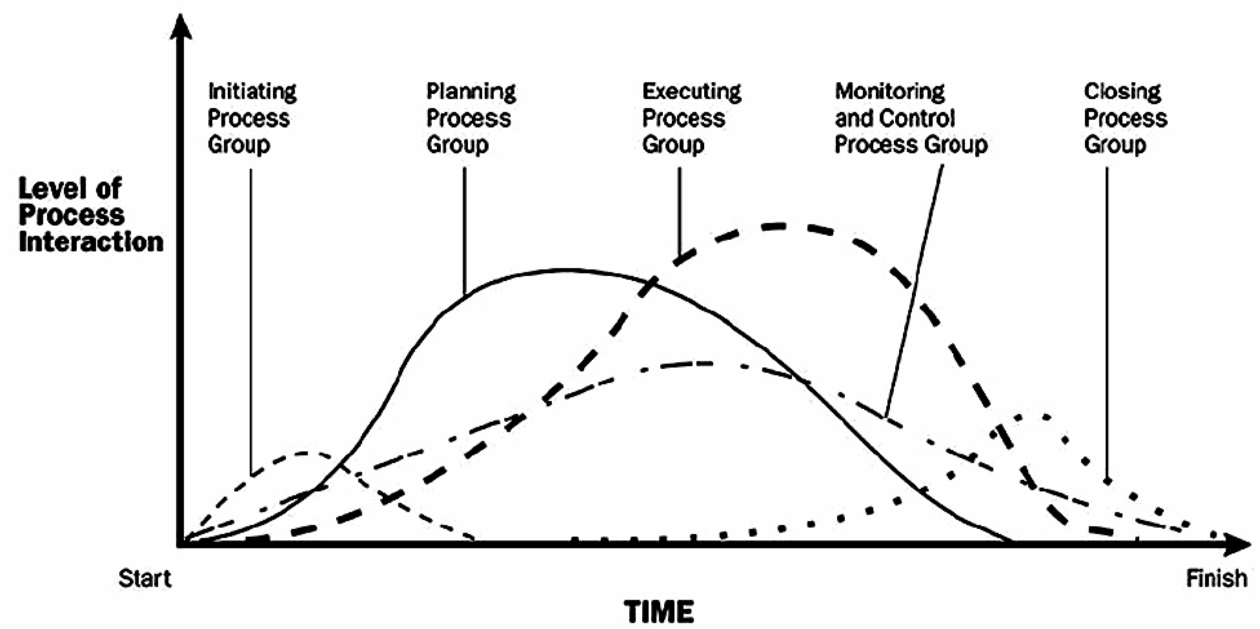

Figure 2: Project Processes according PMI

The Initiating and Planning Process is where the team is being built and trust levels rise – or not. Group dynamics start to come into play immediately and people need leadership, guidance and also need to know each other better – the sooner the better. So, the Project Processes show only part of the picture.

At what levels to coach a crew for the race?

Much more of the picture of such a venture lies hidden. It is like with an iceberg. It is mostly under the water line that things are happening and this is the playground of 'Coachulting' and of the Coachultant. He is the one positioned between the factual and soft skills levels seeking to catalyze among the different views and powers within such Projects in a Solution-Focused way. There are not only concepts to be blueprinted, budgets to be calculated, time plans to be made, architectures to be designed – no - soft skills need to be engineered too!

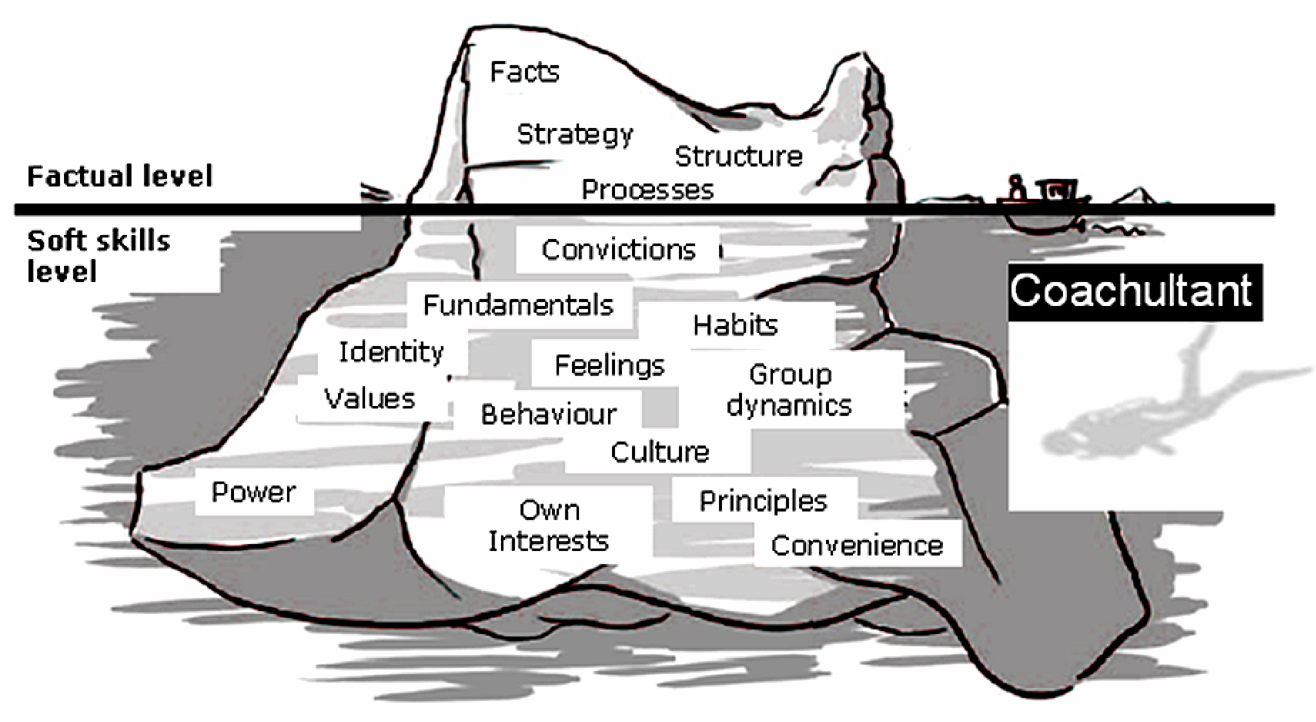

Figure 3: The Coachultant is a SF catalyst for hard and soft factors

To do this engineering work at soft skills level and also be a catalyst of the many different wants and don't wants of the participants in projects, the Coachultant and the team members need to know and see more of the picture at the soft skills level.

In a venture this means understanding each phase such projects go through and having the right tools to engineer the soft skills level of each individual and moreover of the team as a whole. This is where the various key aspects of the Solution-Focused approach and Coachulting come into play.

How can change be smooth and efficient?

The curves in figure 4 show the levels of motivation and self-confidence of a team and how well a team will manage in complex change situations with and without coachulting. Certain measures are needed to smooth the curve and get on to a faster and more efficient track to accomplish the work to be done. This can also be expressed in terms of less time involved and less money spent to achieve the goal of the project.

During the movement of change (see figure 4) and during each different project phase (see figure 2) the tools to optimize the work vary. In the planning oriented starting phase the Solution-Focused coaching tools dominate. During realisation more consulting oriented tools are needed, which can help to solve concrete problems. The respective expert knowledge and concrete tools are needed. The closing phase tools are vital which help to integrate the change into the organisation. It might be a culture change which is needed, to learn to life with the newly introduced solution and processes / organisation structures.

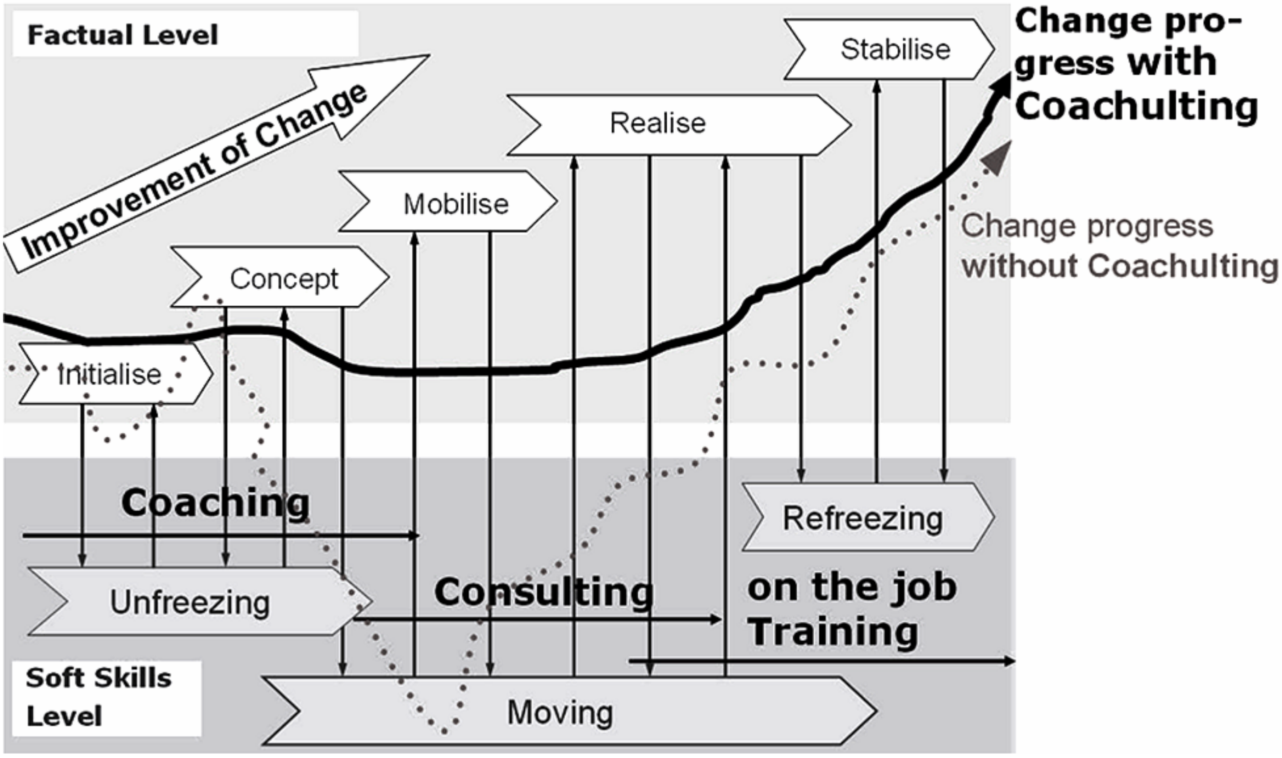

Figure 4: The Change Progress with Coachulting differs from traditional Change Progress

Unfreezing – Initialise/Concept-Phase ➔ Coaching

At the first stage of a project, around the kick-off, it is wise to bring the people together in such a way that they achieve more transparency about who they are and what and how they intend to contribute to this project. A personal assessment of each participant provides insight into the respective strengths of each individual. When integrated into the ordinary project work to be done, it is a great tool to help each other understand how and why each team member reacts in the way she or he does in particular situations. It also helps to establish who is contributing what to a project, based on his/her strengths.

A very powerful SF-tool is re-teaming (Furman and Ahola, reteaming, 2004) to get the project started with a unified mindset, so that all are heading in the same direction. It helps to structure this process of unity – it will not just happen, it needs to be engineered.

Each step of re-teaming is integrated in Workshops and Meetings of the project in such a way that it does not disturb but rather supports the work which has to be done.

In addition the Coachultant ensures that meetings and workshops are prepared and conducted in a Solution-Focused way. An important part is to explain and train team members *how* to interact - how to ask Solution-Focused instead of Problem Focused questions (see Figure 5).

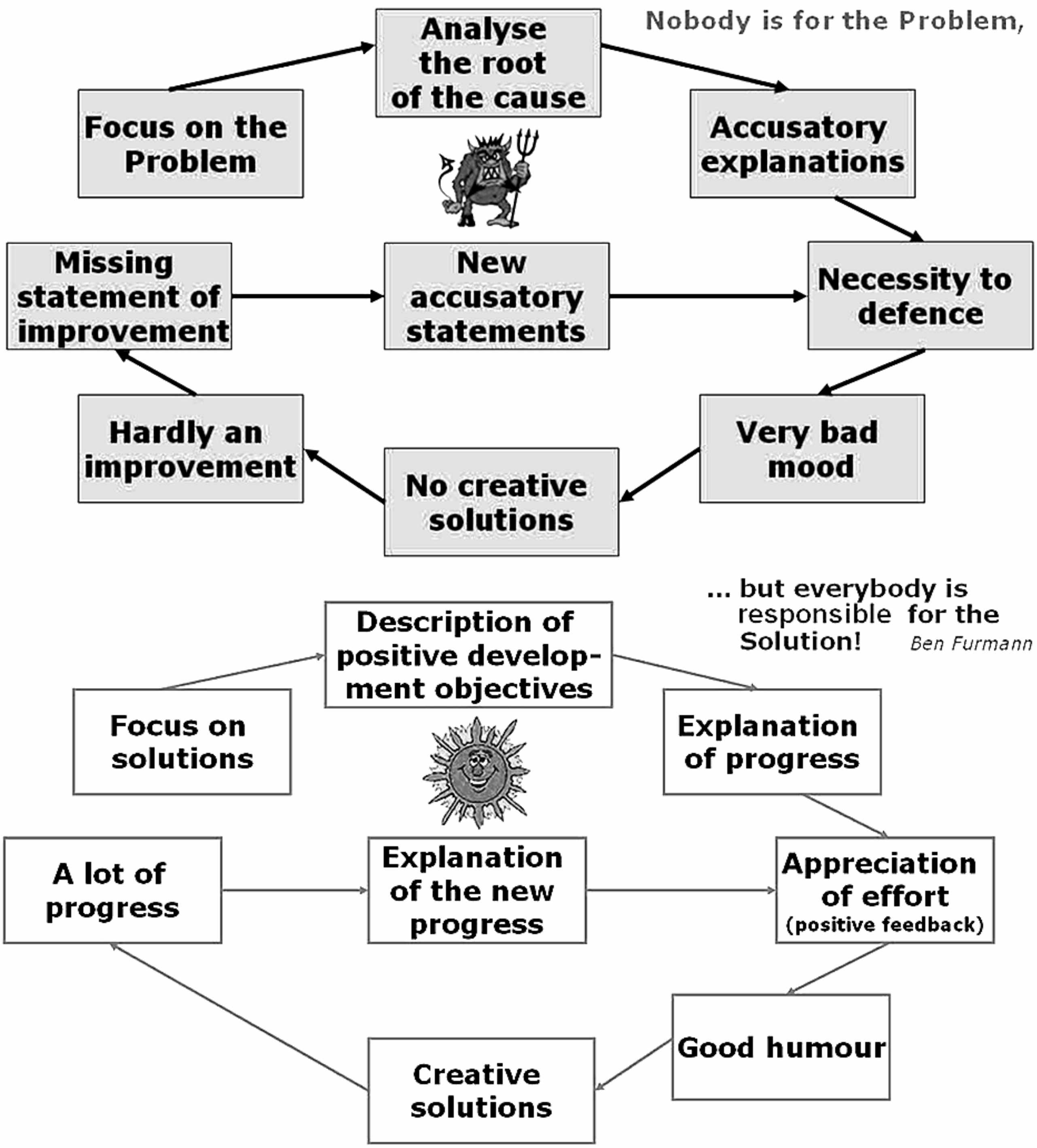

Figure 5: The vicious problem circle versus the Solution-Focused circle

The vicious circle of problem oriented solutions can be broken. With a new Solution-Focused and inspiring way of getting ahead, with more fun and much better solutions and therefore results (see Figure 5, Geisbauer, reteaming, 2004).

Problem focused	Solution focused
Problems and Solutions are connected	Problems and Solutions are likely not connected
Past oriented, what went wrong? – deficit, blame, complex	Future oriented, what works?, possibilities, praise, easy
Concentration on the problem and to control	Concentration on the solution and progress
Based on the "cause and effect" model	Step out in new solutions realm (miracles)
To deepen the problem and then define a solution ➔ an external expert Solution, definitions	Focus on own resources ➔ own solution, actions
External expert know-how what works – a lot of good advices, more a big bang solutions approach	What works already, small distinctions, more small and pragmatic steps forward

Figure 6: Problem versus Solution-Focused

To optimize the team it is helpful to make in addition a team assessment, showing each team member which role somebody should and can play or should not play in such projects. The possibilities to change the assignment of a person within projects are limited, because of the specific know-how each member brings along. But it helps to avoid real mistakes in putting somebody into a role which he should never take. On the other hand it will optimize the role play because the newly achieved transparency among all team members about their roles and what that means for the project (e.g. using people for testing with the strength of working with discipline and as a completer.

Moving / Mobilise & Realise-Phase ➔ Consulting

Next to Coaching, which is a great tool for all phases, but especially in the first phase, more traditional consulting is required when a project is in the realisation-phase. These tools vary depending on the specialised know-how needed. To be able to support this phase extensive experience in such kinds of ventures is a prerequisite.

Refreezing / Stabilise-Phase ➔ on the job Training

At the closing of such ventures the parties involved have to be trained to integrate and learn all the new things (processes, organisational structures, IT-solutions) and how to handle them. Often this requires a change of culture for which an excellent tool is the Twin Star Model (Furman and Ahola, The Twin Star Book, 2004) for engineering the cultural aspects of such change related projects as well as for adapting the line organisation to the new solution and the new culture this entails.

The quality and adaption rate of the new solution has to be monitored carefully during the first 6 to 12 months. A poll, which can be conducted over the intranet for example, with a solution-oriented questionnaire helps to turn weaknesses of the solution around at early stages. It's important to be very close to the early user of the new solution and to have a working change process in place to make the necessary changes in due time. A post calculation is needed to show the profit of the project and to fix this firmly within the management at the end.

Conclusion

With the Solution-Focused Coachulting approach (see Figure 7) challenges of complex change projects are met moreeasily and more efficiently and are therefore not only more satisfying but also more cost effective. The profit is remarkable on all dimensions of such a venture and the success rate gets to where it should be. This results in fewer board members asking the usual questions: "Why are there again such delays?", "Why are there again such cost overruns?" and "Why are we decreasing the scope again" Instead they will be delighted to hear: "The project is on time, with no reduction in scope, and to budget" – in short a much happier state of affairs for all stakeholders of such ventures is possible when one chooses to adopt the Coachulting way (see Figure 7). What are you waiting for?

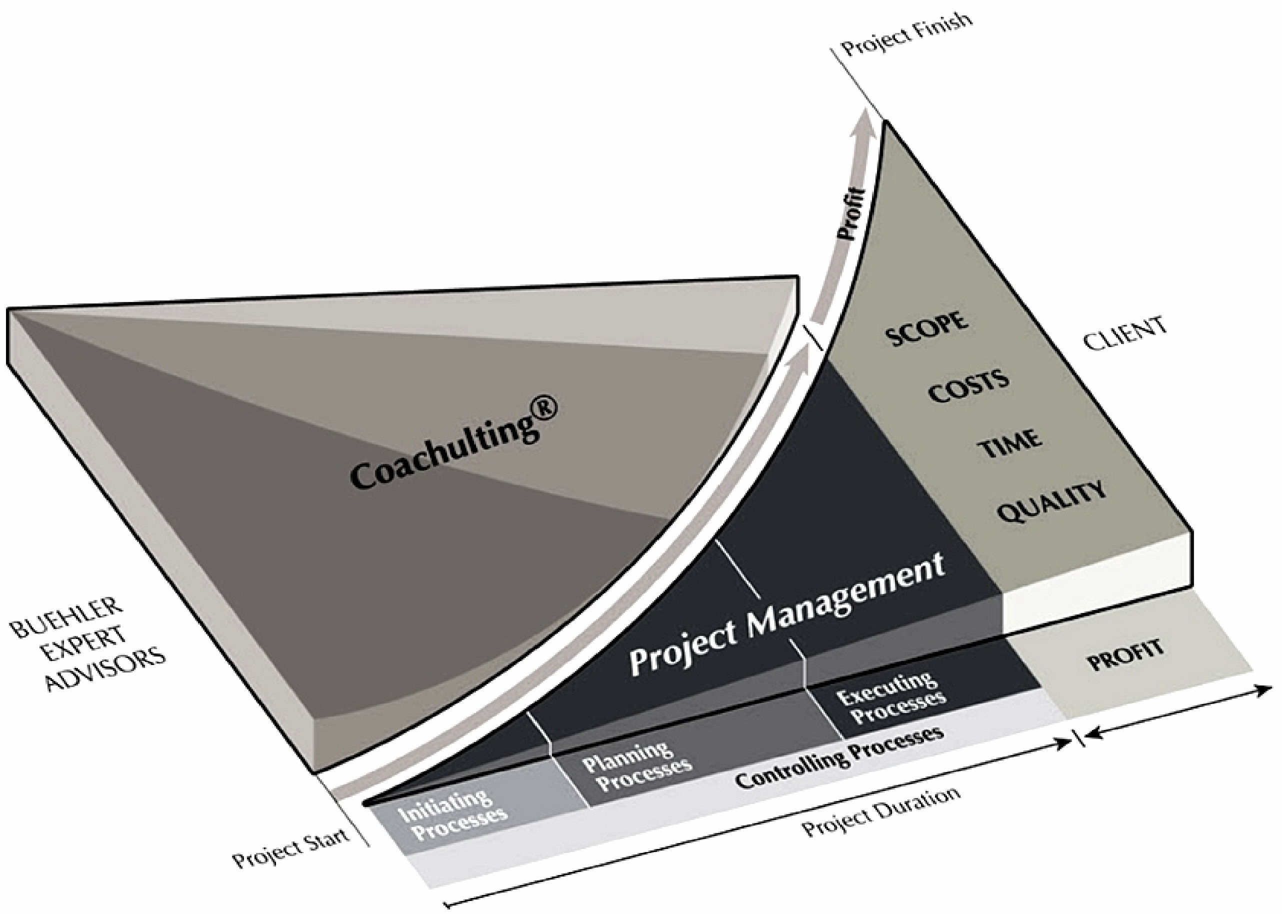

Figure 7: Coachulting – the success insurance

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Jenny Clarke

Turning clients into customers for change - the art of platform building

Keywords: Affirmation, counters, customer, future perfect, platform, project implementation, problem axis, solution axis

Summary

This article explores the art of platform building - an essential, if unglamorous, part of the SF toolkit. I first describe the platform tool and then illustrate its use in a particular job in a factory producing semiconductors. The brief involved a Project Implementation assignment: Head Office had decreed what was to happen and the factory managers wanted to implement this smoothly and effectively. On the face of it, this was a well-defined project. However, as I hope to show, the chances of its success were greatly increased by some careful platform building from the outset.

The Platform Tool

The "Platform" is one of the Solutions tools introduced in the book The Solutions Focus (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 28). The Platform is almost always the starting point for the work of a Solutions Focus (SF) consultant, manager or coach (SF practitioner for short) – the point when the outside consultant meets the client, or where the coach or manager first hears about a problematic situation.

Classically – in the problem-focused world – the present problematic situation lies on a line connecting the origins of the problem through the present to an undesirable future. We call this the Problem axis (Figure 1). The theory is that the problem has intriguing roots in the past and, if things continue unchecked, it will lead to dire consequences in the future. Much time and intellectual energy is devoted to analysing both the roots of problems and just how bad things might become. Diagnosing the problem and investigating the causes of the problem are seen as an essential part of addressing the problem.

SF workers operate on a very different axis – the Solution axis. We are interested in what the client wants (not what they don't want) and what is already happening which is pushing them in the desired direction. We use our analytic skills to explore the desired future using the Future Perfect tool based on the miracle question (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 32); the Counters tool helps us to pile up and investigate examples of the Future Perfect happening already as well as the client's relevant strengths, qualities, skills and resources (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 59).

The role of the SF practitioner is to move the conversation as quickly and elegantly as possible so that it pivots from the problem axis to the solution axis. This is where the Platform tool comes in.

I used to think that this was so obvious as to be almost trivial. However, experience has shown that time spent in this phase of an SF conversation can be time well spent and I now think that building a secure and sturdy platform is a key part of a successful outcome reached in a smooth and harmonious way.

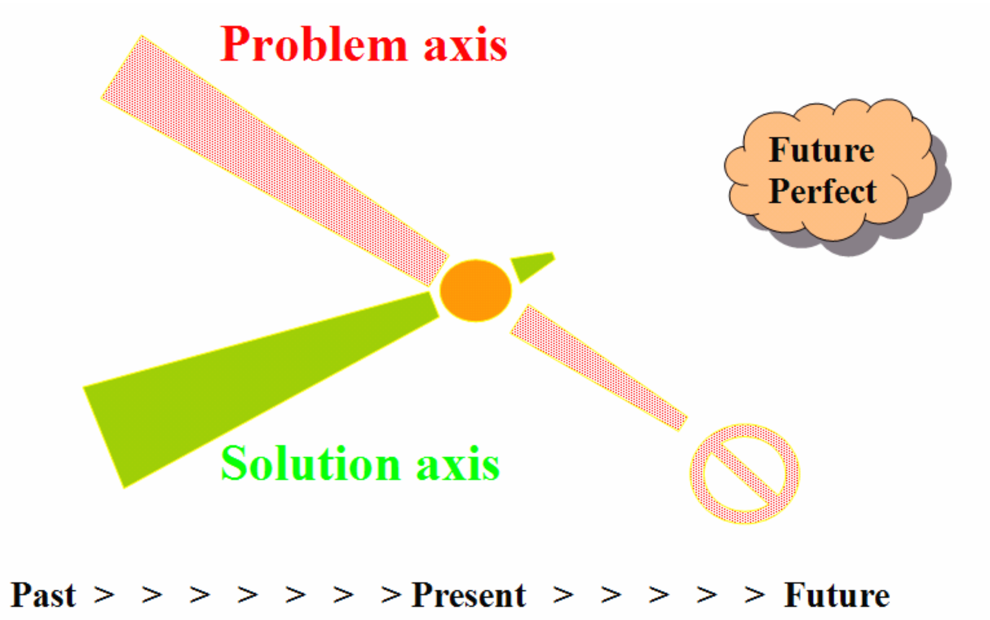

Figure 1: Problem & Solution axes

Building the Platform

The Platform is the starting point of a conversational journey into unexplored territory. So it is important to make the platform a secure setting-off point, giving the client confidence in embarking on the journey. To feel confident, the client must sense that he has been listened to, that his situation is understood and acknowledged, that the general direction is known and that the journey is worthwhile. The SF practitioner must also feel confident before inviting the client to step off the platform – confident that the client is a "customer for change". A "customer" in this specialised sense is someone who wants something to be different AND is prepared to do something about it (if they only knew what). There may be a general feeling of dissatisfaction about a situation, but unless there is someone who wants things to change AND is willing to do something themselves, there is no project. If no-one is bothered by the situation, or if everyone thinks that it's not their job, or not in their sphere of influence, to do something about it, then you haven't yet got a secure platform.

You know you have a customer when you have a sense of permission to go on – the client has told you the situation and is confident that you have heard that story; he has an idea of the direction he wants to go (perhaps captured by a name for the project) and has shown some enthusiasm for setting off in that direction.

Having established a sense of direction, it is worth spending some time exploring the benefits of moving forwards, to make the platform even more secure. The client himself must see some benefit, but there is also a whole range of stakeholders - his colleagues, his department, the company, its customers, his family …. - whose perspective will be interesting to explore. All this adds to the client's motivation and keenness to continue.

And, finally, before stepping off the platform and picking up some of the more sexy tools from the SF toolbox, look at grounds for hope and confidence in making progress. The client will have revealed numerous strengths and resources in the course of the conversation. The good SF practitioner will pause at this stage, reflect on the strengths and resources the client has revealed (the Affirm tool, Jackson and McKergow 2002: 81) and sum up what he wants and the benefits of proceeding.

Platform Building in Practice – A Case Study

Background

A case study may be useful in illustrating the art of platform building. The client was a manufacturer of semiconductors, with production lines working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Their factory was one of half a dozen US-owned plants all over the world. Head Office had invited McKinsey to do a best practice study of production methods throughout the company and similar organisations and come up with new working methods to be adopted on a company-wide basis. By following the recommended working methods, the company hoped to save US$150m a year.

The McKinsey report had significant implications for the factory – there would be lay-offs, reporting lines and job titles would change and there was some concern that the need for absence cover had not been properly factored in to the calculations. However, implementation was not part of McKinsey's brief and so they were no longer available to help the factory management. The factory Managing Director (MD) was relatively new in post. He was aware that implementation was a non-trivial part of the undertaking and wanted to give it its best chance. He had heard about the Solutions Focus approach from his therapist wife, and wondered if it might help. The "sales" meeting itself was an important part of building the platform: rather than spend the time talking about our approach and how great it is, most of the time was taken up by asking about the project and visiting the production line. We were called in about half way through a 39 week project.

The MD proposed a one day work shop with the Project Implementation Team (PIT), a group of 9 people mixed in terms of function, hierarchy and geography within the factory. On the face of it, this was a well-defined project for us, with a well-defined process (one-day workshop) and a clear outcome – meeting the McKinsey recommendations. Associated gains were that this would be seen as a new start for the factory, helping it to move towards a long term responsive future.

Before the workshop

We asked for two more important platform building meetings before the workshop itself: a meeting with the PIT and a meeting with the MD and other members of the Senior Management Team on site. We described the meeting with the PIT as a fact-finding meeting to bring us up to speed on the project and the associated issues. After hearing about the project, we asked "What's going well so far?" This led to a long list of achievements to date, punctuated frequently with "buts". We called the "buts" "potential challenges" and listed them on flip charts and captured them on Power Point before the workshop itself the following day. We closed the pre-meeting by feeding back the list of achievements to date, and the list of potential issues (where necessary translated so that they were expressed in terms of what they wanted, not what they didn't want) and then told the group what had impressed us thus far in what we had heard.

We then met the Senior Management Team, and elicited from them their best hopes for the project as far as their site was concerned. We also asked them all to reflect on a time in their own experience in which they had felt part of a well-motivated team, taking pride and pleasure in their work. The list led to a useful list of "Things we must remember to get right" and helped engage the Senior Managers in the project.

The workshop itself

As usual in workshops run by The Solutions Focus, the room was decorated with posters with appropriate quotations and colourful toys were put onto the tables, so that people who think best while fiddling with something had something (quiet) to fiddle with. Having met everyone the previous day, we could start the workshop in a relaxed yet purposeful way. We repeated the list of achievements already gathered and the list of 18 challenges. These included things like

– improving confidence in the data that the new regime was based on.
– introducing and observing "rules of engagement" during the roll-out of the new system.
– maintaining interest in jobs which many perceived as "dumbed down" – more specialisation could mean less variety.
– training implications.
– robustness in general – lots of "what ifs .." were generated.

The list was very similar to the Senior Managers' "things we must remember to get right"; we reported the Senior Managers' views to the PIT.

Next, we asked the participants to list the key groups of people affected by the changes. The list included operators, foremen, managers, day staff including engineering specialists, the different shifts and "our masters in the USA". Working alone, each participant drew up a list of benefits for one of the groups; then in groups of 3, the benefits lists were shared and augmented. Sharing these lists in the full group was a very energizing experience (we captured the lists on flip charts and later on PowerPoint) and set the right mood for stepping off the platform to the next stage of the workshop.

After stepping off the Platform

After leaving the Platform (after coffee break in the morning), the rest of the workshop ran on fairly classic SF lines. There was a Future Perfect exercise in which participants were asked

"Suppose .. that a magic wand is waved and suddenly everything we've talked about is in place and all the challenges have been resolved … " Two groups were asked to make a story board showing a day in the life of the site from the point of view of all the different constituencies identified earlier. What will be happening? Who is doing what? Who is talking to whom? What information is being exchanged? etc

The story boards were compared and common threads drawn out, especially the important interfaces in the life of the factory. Then, working individually, everyone was asked to scale the present situation half way through the project (where 10 was the story they had just put together and 0 meant none of that was happening) and to list everything that was happening to get that high up the scale. Going round the room, people gave one of the achievements from their list at a time until 5 pages of flip chart paper had been filled with Counters (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 59).

Then everyone picked the achievement which impressed them the most and made some observations about what had helped it to happen.

Finally, everyone chose a small action for themselves – something that they could do during the next week, chosen to raise their own perception of the current position on the scale by just one point – or even a fraction of a point. People left the room feeling energetic and purposeful.

Reflections

Over half of the time spent on this project was taken up in Platform Building. This included visiting the production line – an important symbol of interest, willingness to learn and desire to become familiar with the project. The client felt heard and understood and all the “problems”, “challenges” or “issues” (choose your euphemism!) were aired and acknowledged. But they were acknowledged “with a twist” as Bill O’Hanlon (1999) would put it. The twist is from what’s wrong to what would be better – to pivot from the problem axis to the solutions axis.

Since that work was completed in the summer of 2005, we have been involved in three more projects with the same client – designing and implementing new reporting structures, cost reduction and detailed job definition in the light of the new organizational structure. When we asked one group what they were particularly proud of at work in the previous couple of months, they mentioned the way the recent lay-offs had been handled – a major concern of the post McKinsey PIT. We expect to enjoy a continuing relationship with the client for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Time spent building a platform is time well spent: it lets the client feel heard; it gives the consultant valuable information about the client’s strengths and resources; it gives the consultant time to learn about the issues affecting the client – and to learn some three letter acronyms and other important bits of vocabulary and jargon, thus raising the consultant’s credibility.

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Esin Suvarierol

Solution-Focused Work and Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt) for lasting solutions in complex projects

Keywords: managing complexity in projects, project-oriented organization, systemic structural constellations (SySt), Solution-Focused process framework, translation into context, preconditions

Summary

This article describes a process framework for working on complex projects with Solution-Focused work and systemic structural constellations (SySt) [1] and how to create the preconditions. Building trust is a vital part of achieving acceptance of these unfamiliar methods in the modern task-orientated organization. When the benefits concerning structural constellations are “translated” to fit the organizational environment and culture, then the advantages and possibilities not only for the projects but also for their organizations can really be appreciated. This article shows how the right conditions and atmosphere are created by allowing organization members to participate in the process of change right from the beginning. In this way, a process framework is constructed that allows the integration of Solution-Focused work and systemic structural constellations into project management. This process framework includes a Solution-Focused kick-off interview, structural constellation work, a SF transfer-interview and an SF integration-interview. Accompanying the project by combining these different approaches, all of which contribute their own unique perspectives and qualities for positive change, the full benefits for managing complexity are thus increased.

1. Project management methods have their limits

The complexity and dynamic nature of large projects, especially IT-projects, is increasing according to the technical and economic requirements. 77% of global CEOs say that the level of complexity in their organizations is higher than it was 3 years ago (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006). The causes are many and varied. Complexity is associated with value-creating activities involved in globalisation and it should be managed as effectively as possible.

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[1] In this text the term "Systemic Structural Constellations" (SySt) stands for that as it was developed by Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibéd (Sparrer, 2004). SySt is a registered trade mark.

According to the findings, the most significant problems in projects are unclear goals and lack of information as well as lack of management support (GPM, 2004). With these types of problems traditional project management methods have reached their limits.

Managing the stakeholder as well as the change of requirements and goals actively is mentioned as two of the essential success factors for efficient projects.

"Technical complex projects are the easy ones, in my fifteen years as project manager I never had a project failed on technique" says an experienced project manager in an international company.

The challenge is to recognise the nature of the complexity and then work to manage it as effectively as possible. That means coping with complexity when it adds value and simplifying when it does not.

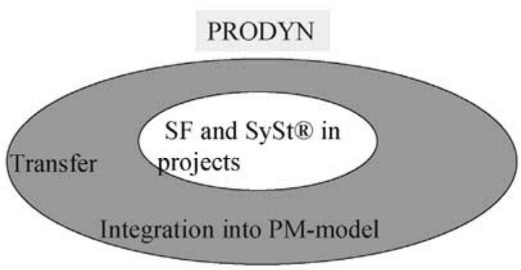
2. Prodyn: a model for integrative use of solution-focused approach and Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt) in complex projects

One of the main questions we had was "how to design a framework over the whole process combining Solution Focus as a verbal method and SySt as a transverbal language over the whole process?"

Prodyn (project complexity and dynamic management) is a basic concept to develop an innovative support toolbox for managing complexity within projects using Solution-Focused Approach (SF) and Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt), as well as to integrate and adapt the benefits of both of these approaches when dealing with specific project management models.

Prodyn is promoted as an innovative service by ZIT (Center for Innovation and Technology, Vienna).

- SySt® is a well-tested and proven method that works in complex, social systems like Projects
- SySt® generates new information and solutions
- Prodyn allows the transfer of systemic constellations as an additional project management method



Graphic 1: Prodyn: model for integrating SF and SySt in projects and into project management

3. What are the special benefits of Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt) in project organizations?

Systemic Structural Constallations (SySt), developed by Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibéd, is as a form of language, the *transverbal language*, spoken not by a single person, but by a group of persons. This language combines verbal and transverbal language but also goes beyond them (Sparrer, 2006, Varga von Kibéd, 2006).The basis of this language is the representative perception, which can be described as a path to the unconscious mind between us.

In Organizations this aspect of unconsciousness is widely neglected. However SySt can bring a complete change of perspective (Varga von Kibéd, 2000 p.20).

System constellations brings a further dimension which cannot be replaced by interpersonal communication, and also because interpersonal communication cannot be replaced by a conversation with oneself. Thus we can see system constellations as a form of meta-communication in social systems.(Schlötter 2005 p. 194)

Project organizations can use a qualitatively different way of solving problems compare to the usual form of verbal communication. (Schlötter, 2005 p. 202).

This doesn't make traditional project management unnecessary but is a very useful addition in terms of managing complexity as effectively as possible.

Systemic structural constellation work is especially useful when

- It is necessary to make use of implicit knowledge to deal with complexity in organizations.
- When there are a large number of relevant factors and all the interactions and connections cannot be properly checked.
- unexpressed or unclear goals and requests by clients or other stakeholders should be considered
- effects of planned changes and decisions should be tested

4. Accompanying the project through the whole process: essential factors for lasting benefits

Structural constellations has useful effects even if you use them only at one point of the project, but experience shows that lasting benefits will usually be seen only after *consistent use* in a project.

We took this as the starting point and made a design, making it possible to "translate" information from the constellations into the specific context of the project and then integrate the benefits on the level of the concrete project *and* on the level of project management.

– Outside layer: level of project management in an organization
– Inside layer: level of a project

According to the length and the objectives of a project, the following elements will be used in three phases (starting, implementation and closing down phases) of the project.

Outside layer: level of project management in an organization

The first step is a *Solution-Focused kick-off-interview* with all key actors and experts for project management, called "integration circle". The aim is to find out the path of useful change, as well as the vision or "miracle" of a more effective project management in that organization. We are interested in their understanding of a successful project, in the typical difficulties experienced, what makes them go to their limits, and the coping strategies they use for this. We want to get some ideas about what should be changed to make projects more successful and what would have helped to make them even more successful.

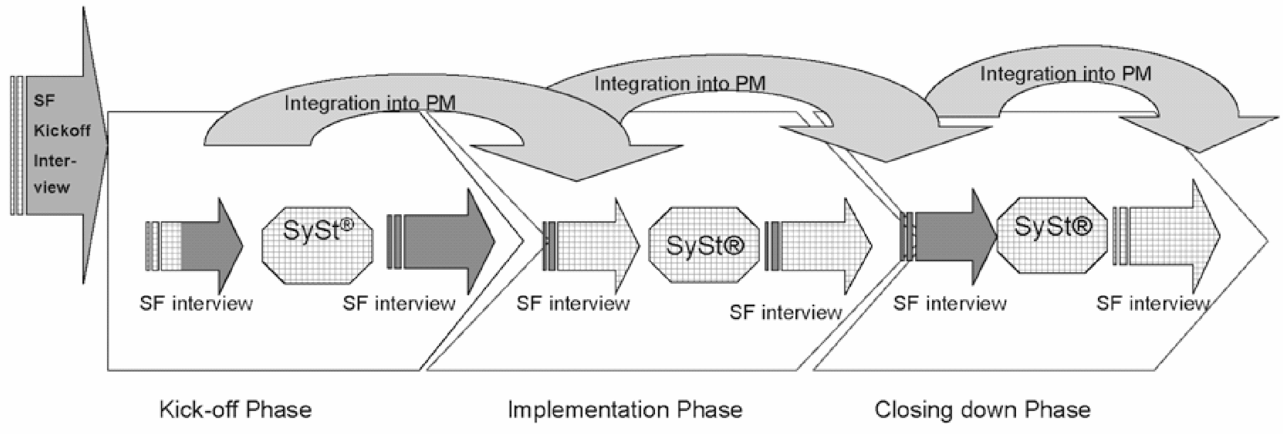
Inside layer: level of a project

– systemic structural constellation, SySt
    - the main aims of the SF interview are context- and goal clarification for the constellation, selecting the system elements and the suitable SySt format
    - systemic structural constellation
    - The aim of the Solution-Focused dialogue afterwards is to reflect on the impressions of the whole "solution picture" in order to have a shared understanding of it.
– Solution-Focused *transfer-interview* as an additional element:

  A "Solution picture" of a structural constellation creates the space for new possibilities. The ambiguous and abstract language of structural constellations makes a "translation" necessary into the task and goal-oriented culture of management so that the effects of the constellation process can be made concrete and long lasting. Solution-Focused questions about the details of the first small changes then helps to transform the effects into the practical reality of a project.

Outside layer: level of project management

– The final step of each phase is the Solution-Focused integration interview with the so-called "integration circle". Here the aim is to identify workable structures based on collective experiences in one project that will produce lasting benefits and advantages for future projects in an organization that has undergone this process. The differences and benefits should be measured according to the “miracle” of the kick-off-interview.



Graphic 2: Prodyn steps with SF and SySt ® through the project process

5. How we combine Solution-Focused elements with Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt)

Solution-Focused principles and attitude in SySt

The principles of solution focus are already integrated into Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt)

Solution-Focused brief therapy is one of the main roots of systemic structural constellations. The special SF-way of thinking, questioning with “not knowing”, without judging or being biased are basic attitudes in both approaches.

There are some special groups of SySt, called Solution-Focused SySt, a combination of SySt and Solution-Focused interviews, which were developed by Insa Sparrer (Sparrer, 2004). In particular, the “Solution geometric interview”, a Solution-Focused interview with representatives in a structural constellation, is very effective and pragmatic for working in organizations. (Sparrer, 2006)

Diverse methodical advantages, diverse information, more benefit

Both Solution-Focused interview and SySt can supplement each other. They create in different ways ideas for the next steps and help to identify the specific solutions that people need (Insa Sparrer, 2006). As a transverbal language a constellation makes it possible to use the “implicit” knowledge and experience of a project team in a new way. As a three-dimensional picture it makes visible what is between the relevant elements of a problem or question (Sparrer, 2001). A Solution-Focused interview on the other side makes it possible to get detailed information about the next steps and put these together to form a shared, common view. This kind of verbal and detailed information is, in the context of management, already usual in relation to the information of a constellation, which at the beginning is seen as unfamiliar.

Solution-Focused dialogue after a structural constellation

This is a vital part of Systemic Structural Constellation work in organizations. Sharing impressions, observations and asking questions afterwards is helpful in creating a common understanding of the constellation process. It is also important to remember that as a facilitator you have to take care that any impressions will not be interpreted as communication between individuals but as a meta-communication of the system. If some interpretations are made then additional interpretations can be given as suggestions, so that several points of view will be available.

Small steps in a process

The real change happens between the meetings so we have to focus on the small steps and changes in-between to keep the energy for change and then increase it. The more such methods are new in an organization, the more you have to help by observing any small differences that emerge.

Beginning with the compliments - a snowball

"Let's hope that you know that you don't know what your client's problem really means. You must try to do something that brings a change for the client, even a small one, which he accepts as a positive change. This is like the snowball effect because it gets bigger and bigger as it rolls down the mountain". (Steve de Shazer, 2004 p.99 quoted Milton Erickson)

The snowball metaphor from Milton Erickson is very well known. Using compliments to start a meeting creates a positive atmosphere and makes solution talking easier. Steve de Shazer always began his interviews with "thank you for coming". That is a very short form of beginning with compliments.

6. Specific conditions for working with SySt in organizations - What helps to build trust?

Constellations work best under very specific conditions (Insa Sparrer, 2001).

Top-down strategy

In large organizations making a decision about using a new method is a complex process in itself. As an external consultant you don't know what really counts and who the key decision makers are in an organization. But you can go with the attitude of “not knowing” and listen carefully with “Solution-Focused ears” (Insoo Kim Berg, 1999, p. 47).

According to our experiences in project-oriented organizations a top-down strategy is needed to introduce Solution-Focused work and Structural Constellations, SySt. It is essential to consider all relevant internal structures and to involve all relevant people. Sometimes it takes a long time making a decision and building the preconditions, but it is an important task (compare McKergow, Jackson, 2002, p.29).

Internal Cultural Interpreters

People in organizations such as internal consultants and human resource managers are mostly familiar with Systemic Constellation Work or other group simulation methods *and* with the specific organizational culture. They are of course very welcome as “cultural interpreters”.

Giving information in a familiar form

For a Solution-Focused consultant it is necessary to be aware of the specific culture of an organization, and then to speak in their “language”, especially at the beginning. One way to achieve this is by adapting the form of giving information to the particular culture of the organization.

A very effective possibility is an information workshop with people who have different functions and perspectives within a project. All questions can then be answered and any doubts expressed. This helps to find out what is expected and what is possible. A practical experience with structural constellation helps people to get some ideas of what kind of concrete information and solutions can be created.

Conclusions

Our experiences at the end of the “information and building preconditions” phase are as follows:

Our process framework “Prodyn” is attractive to IT-organizations as a basic model for integrative use of solution-focused work and Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt).

We have also learned that it is necessary to work flexibly with this model.

According to our experiences most of the project-oriented organizations choice top-down strategy. They consider internal structures relevant and involve all the main actors before forming an opinion concerning the methods. Those people closely involved in the organization and who are familiar with Solution Focus and SySt are very helpful as “cultural interpreters”.

Making us aware of the specific organizational culture, translating the advantages of SySt into possible benefits and results that really *count* in projects and going into detail step by step in every organization takes time but they work in terms of building the specific conditions before working with Structural Constellations effectively.

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Bruce E. Woodings

Aligning Large Multi-Cultural Teams Performance With A Solutions Focused Approach

Keywords: Performance, Alignment, Solutions Focused approach, implicit expectations, explicit expectations, multi-cultural teams, problem talk, solutions talk

Summary

In today's fast paced world, project leadership finds it difficult to take the time to assure that their team is aligned on key objectives. This is further complicated by the need to execute the work in multiple locations using newly formed multi-cultural teams. This article highlights key issues that leadership must consider when managing resources in a dynamic, ever changing environment. It presents guidelines for facilitators and project leadership on focusing teams in solving issues on their journey to achieving project success.

This article introduces the Performance Alignment Process, a simple five step approach that enables teams to rapidly align themselves on solutions for critical project execution issues. The process can be applied to small and large projects, and can be implemented at any time throughout execution activities.

Finally, it illustrates alignment techniques that maximize the value of the time spent in the workshop through practical application of the Solutions Focused approach to resolve issues.

What is alignment?

The term alignment can be thought of as either a noun or verb. As a noun, it is having processes and systems harmonized and working well together. As a verb, it is a set of actions taken to gain a unified approach toward goals. This article focuses on taking action to achieve success. There is no right way or wrong way to align individuals or teams. The *Performance Alignment Process* is very dynamic taking the elements of the team and applying the techniques that facilitates a common approach.

Traditionally large projects incorporate multiple levels of management which require alignment vertically from the senior leadership to the Project Unit teams in addition to alignment at each level, as can be seen from the diagram in Figure 1.

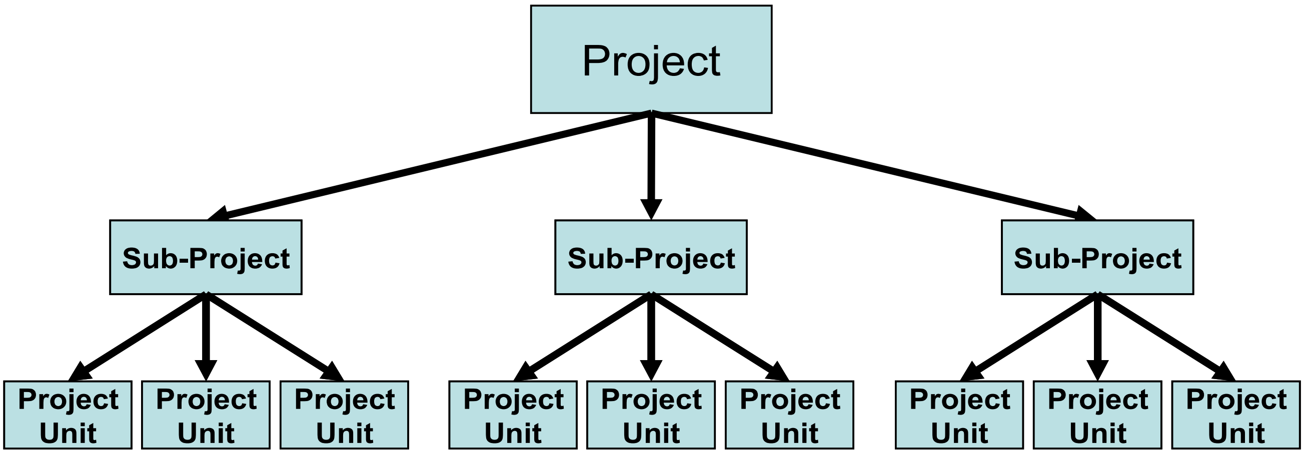

Figure 1

During the course of running any project, there are four key dimensions that have to be aligned in order to maximise performance (Labovitz and Rosansky 1997). These are:

- Strategy
- People
- Processes
- Customers

The first two are concerned with organizational strategy and with the people we rely on daily to transform the strategy into meaningful work. The last two involve business processes that create what the Customer most values. Due to the dynamic nature of projects, there is an constant balancing act involving leadership and team members in setting direction, linking processes and systems, and making adjustments to assure that the strategy will achieve the expectations of the Customer. At the centre of this alignment balance, are already well established expectations that align the needs of the Customer and of Project Leadership. Figure 2 demonstrates these relationships.

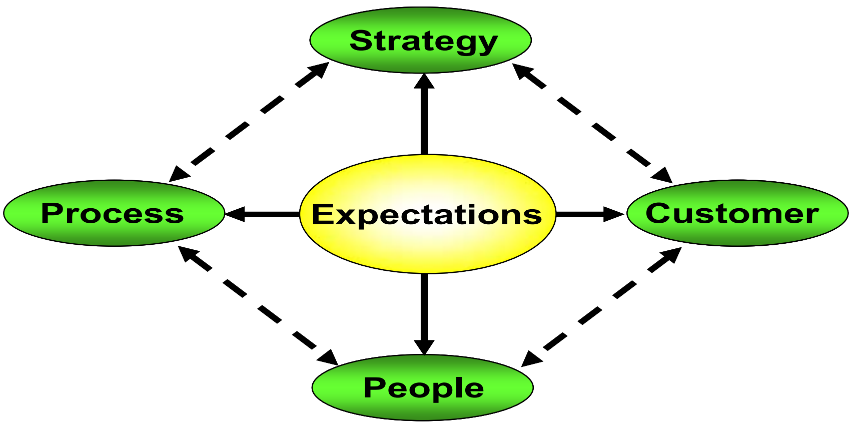

Figure 2

Prior to the initiation of the *Performance Alignment Process*, leadership needs to gain a better understanding of project & customer expectations and goals. One of the greatest barriers in a project team's future success is gaining an aligned understanding of the performance expectations necessary in order to satisfy *all* the "Customers" of the project. All too often, the individual expectations of corporate partners, senior leadership, project managers, operations managers, project teams and suppliers/contractors are in conflict and may not be well defined.

Typically, with new projects, the *"explicit"* expectations are communicated using work descriptions or contract commitments documents. However, it is quite common that *"implicit"* expectations (those which are not documented) have not been communicated adequately between the team members because there is the unsaid expectation that "you should know them anyway". Taking the time to transform as many *implicit expectations* into *explicit expectations* pays great dividends by not having to re-perform work that is not aligned with the desired outcome. Furthermore, Customers expect team members to be proactive in their issue resolution and decision making. The expectation relationships are shown in *Figure 3*. With expectations frequently shifting, the team is continually challenged to communicate the explicit and implicit expectations and make sure that one team's successes do not compromise the goals or initiatives of other teams.

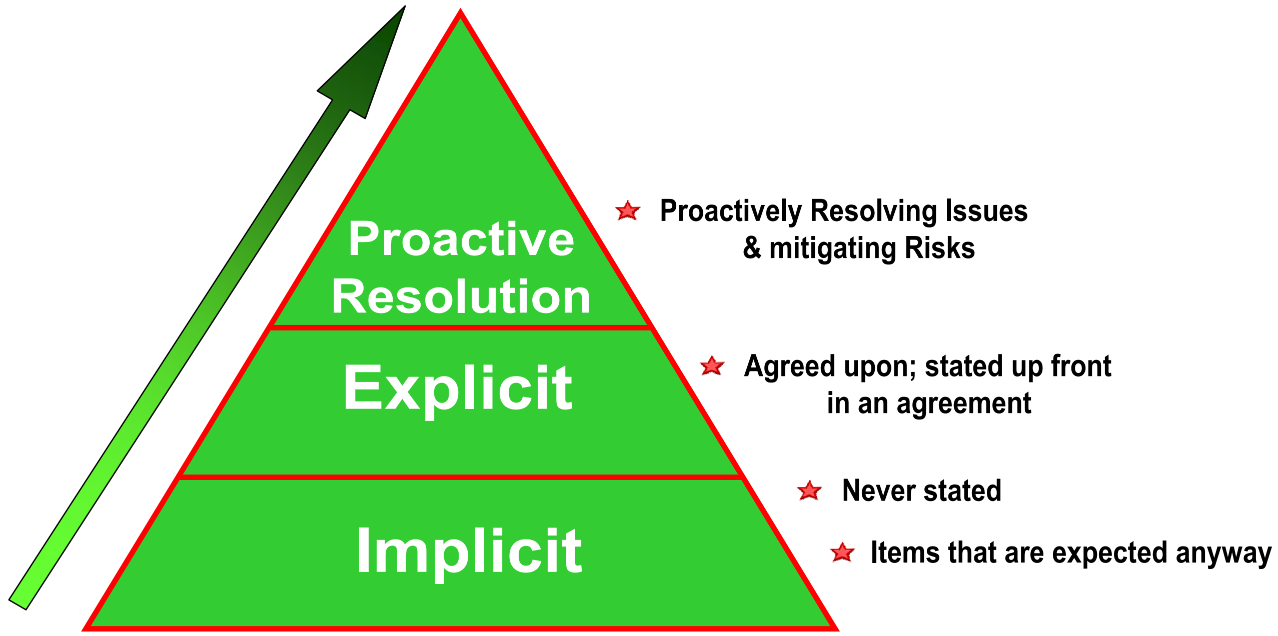

Figure 3

Applying the performance process

Using the model presented in *Figure 2*, the *Performance Alignment Process* was developed to enable teams to discover solutions to key issues affecting performance, maintaining energies on executing the work whilst balancing the four dimensions. The model directs efforts of the teams by applying Solutions Focused techniques (Jackson and McKergow 2002). Acting as a catalyst for achieving alignment, the trained facilitator teaches the teams a simple five step process for finding solutions as shown in Figure 4. These steps are:

Step 1 - Planning the Journey

Step 2 - Beginning the Journey

Step 3 - Agreeing on the Destination

Step 4 - Actions for Success

Step 5 - Arriving at the Destination

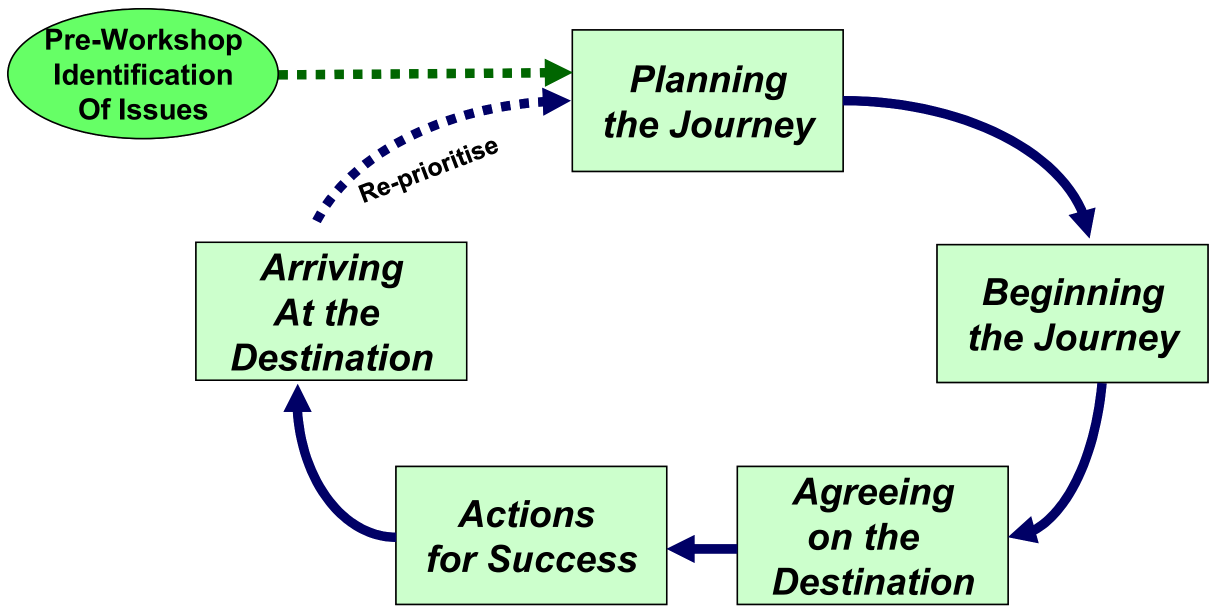

Figure 4

Step 1 - Planning the Journey

Teams, anxious to get started, are often influenced by the Customer's desire to demonstrate the project is achieving progress. This frequently causes actions to be taken without sufficient detailed planning being done at the start.

The first step in the alignment process, "Planning the Journey", builds upon the principles developed by David Kolb (Kolb 1984) by following a very simple 4 step cycle as shown in Figure 5.

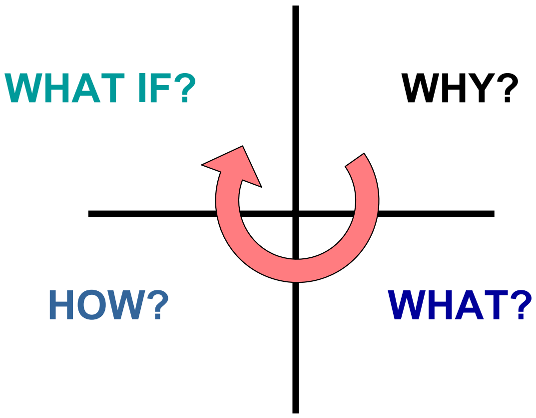

Figure 5

- The first step requires the team to understand *WHY* they need to solve a particular issue. Without an aligned understanding of *WHY* , the path to success will be uncertain.
- Having agreed upon the *WHY*, the next step is to determine the key activities or deliverables (the *WHAT)* that have to be done to achieve the *WHY*. It is important that the team does not begin to define *WHAT's* in terms of actions, which occur in the third step of the process.
- Once the *WHAT's* are well defined, the team can proceed to answer the question of *HOW* can the *WHAT's* can be answered (actions to be taken). For each *WHAT* there needs to be at least one action developed.
- The last step looks into the future and is where the team assesses the risks to project success. For high risk areas, the *WHAT IF* step is implemented, providing a back-up approach in the form of actions in case a high risk needs to be mitigated.

Example

ISSUE:

The team leadership does not resolve problems quickly

WHY:

Rapid issue resolution is essential to completing the project on schedule and meeting the demands of the Customer

WHAT:

Need to define in detail what the issue is, its impact on the project and when decision has to be made

Need a clear understanding of who owns the problem

Need an method for assuring implementation

HOW:

All problems must be entered into the Issue Register with a brief description of its impact on the success of the project

Issues are prioritise during the weekly leadership meeting

Priority issues are explicitly defined for team understanding

Solution end point (define the completion) is agreed upon, "Action Owner" is assigned who is accountable for delivery

Solution agreed upon by all involved in the solution

Leadership monitors completion of action plans in weekly meeting

WHAT IF:

In the event that the action plans are not being accomplished according to schedule or not achieving the desired results, the "Action Owners" present in the weekly meeting an alternate issue resolution plan for acceptance by the team

Aligning the leadership

When planning the journey, the team must have a clear understanding of what the goals and objectives are for the project. This means bringing senior leadership together and gaining alignment on the purpose of the project. This effort is intended to identify the explicit and implicit expectations (Figure 3) and gain alignment on the priorities.

This step sets the foundation for agreeing on the destination. Without agreement, leadership will send mixed messages on the basis for the goals and objectives of the project.

Establishing WHAT needs to be achieved

Preparation for the Performance Alignment Workshop can take one of two approaches, aligning new projects or aligning established projects. A description of each follows:

New Projects

For new projects, the initial step in the alignment process begins once key members have joined the project. Building upon the expectations developed by the Senior Leadership, the project establishes the preliminary basis and builds upon the leaderships experience from previous jobs including:

- focusing on goals & objectives based on project expectations
- establishing the project drivers
- aligning the team around scope of work, schedule, cost
- understanding customer expectations

Existing Projects

In existing projects, the team has already executed many activities and understand areas where there is underperformance. To gain insight into where the team is poorly aligned, the facilitator conducts one-on-one interviews with key leaders and managers to uncover the issues they perceive will compromise success. Interviews are intended to:

- Identify areas in team dynamics that reduce the overall team's performance
- uncover issues, personal and team, that are currently on the person's mind (of most significance to him at that time) that may be causing the work to be unfocused on the end goals and objectives
- provide a safe environment for individuals to vent their emotions and anxieties on issues impacting their personal performance
- begin to build a trust between the facilitator and the person

Typically, especially with teams that have technical challenges, team members try to establish the causes of what doesn't work, rather than what they are trying to achieve. During the interview, the facilitator encourages the individual to define the issues in terms of the result they desire. This coaching shifts thinking from a "Problem Focused" approach to a "Solution-Focused" approach.

A key deliverable for the initial interview process is to learn more about the dynamics of the project team and identify those areas that may inhibit the team's performance. In both cases, the facilitator establishes a list of the issues raised and categorizes them to assist in the prioritization process.

One of the goals for the facilitator is to maximise the value of the time spent in the workshop. In order to do this, the facilitator must compile the information collected in the interviews and present it in a form the team can easily understand. This includes translating the sometimes complex data into concepts using simplified diagrams and tables, taking care not to modify the intent of the message. Having compiled the data, the next stage of the alignment, platform building, may begin.

Step 2 - Beginning the Journey

A key role of the facilitator is to take a group of individuals, brought together to achieve a finished product, and get their ambitions and initiatives focused on mutual goals, without reducing their creative potential to complete the work effectively. This begins with senior leadership clearly describing key expectations for the project, which forms the foundation for all activities that will be performed. Anyone who has worked on large projects knows there is continual assessment on the impact of issues on achieving goals. During the alignment process, team leadership must explicitly define the guidelines for risk assessment (both qualitatively and quantitatively) so that project priorities can be properly decided.

Prioritizing issues

In order to accelerate the alignment process, the facilitator prepares a list of issues team members revealed in the interview process. This list is presented to the team as "these are the issues I heard you say were of greatest concern." As a group, the team members exchange what the issues mean to them. This dialogue provides rich interaction and allows the team to gain an understanding and a respect for the opinions of others. It also allows for an appreciation of personal issues that could affect performance. Using their experience, each individual prioritises the issues based upon their perceived impact on the success of the project. This can be done by any number of methods, but since the team is trying to gain a qualitative consensus, a simple voting technique will work. For example, ask each person to vote on their top 6 issues, and record the results. It should be noted that solutions will be developed for most of the issues later on, but in the workshop the focus is on the solutions for the top 6.

Groups that have a structured and technical background frequently take the "problem talk" approach to solving problems (Jackson and McKergow 2002). This traditional failure analysis approach may shed light on what may have gone wrong, but typically does not provide the right path to the solution. Here problems are defined in terms of what is **not** wanted, diverting the thought process from "what the aligned expectation should be". This barrier, or GAP analysis, may identify actions to take, but the actions usually focus on mitigating the barrier, making them too general, and frequently not resulting in the success the team really wants.

The success of the *Performance Alignment Process* depends on how well the team defines the issue they are trying to resolve. To accomplish this, breakout teams of 5 to 8 in number, are assigned one of the 6 priority issues and asked to define the issue in detail. These *explicit* definitions must be described, however, in terms of what they would like to achieve, rather than what they want to avoid. This is frequently difficult and the facilitator must provide guidance in order to establish a firm foundation for subsequent solutions activities. This is the most important step in the alignment process; if the issue is not defined well, the team will have return to this step and mature the definition at a later time.

Example

> *Bill Armstrong, project manager for the Enterprise Office Building, realized that his newly formed project team was not working well together. This team was made up of personnel from the 3 company consortium resources. Bill arranged for a Performance Alignment workshop to be held. In preparation for the workshop, each manager, with input from personnel working for them, was requested to develop a list of issues. These issues were summarized and used as the basis of the workshop. In the workshop, the team members prioritized the issues, with the top most important listed below:*

1. *Team members are unsure of the schedule for completion of the work*
2. *There is uncertainty in who is responsible for work which appears to be included in more than one contractors contract*
3. *The roles and responsibilities of the team members are not well understood*

Due to limited time, the initial workshop focused on solving Issue 1 (Team members are unsure of the schedule for completion of the work). The Performance Alignment facilitator asked the team to generally define the issue (in terms of what they prefer to happen), with the definition summarized below:

Schedule should have:

- *Well thought list of activities with completion dates*
- *Defined activities that are on the critical path for completion of the project*
- *A method for reporting progress*

These are used for Step 3

Step 3 – Agreeing on the Destination

Having established an aligned understanding of the issue, the next task is to develop what they want to achieve, the "Future Perfect"(Jackson and McKergow 2002). In the *Performance Alignment Process*, this becomes the team's *"Miracle Vision"*. It is important that the team provide a one line description, further clarified with additional details that describe the key accomplishments needed to achieve the *"Miracle Vision"*. *Figure 6* provides a simple representation of the process.

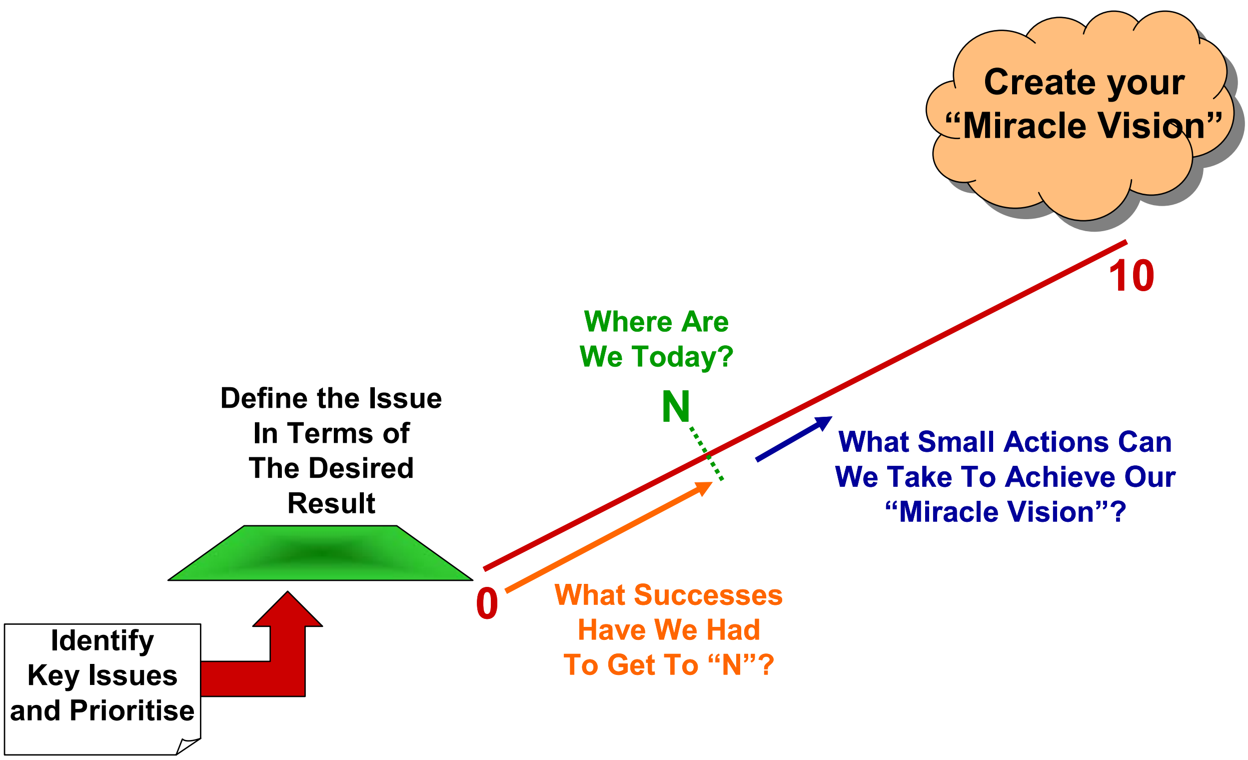

Figure 6

Example

Using the broad definition, the team decided that their "Miracle Vision" was:

> *"Maintained project progress momentum by delivery of the work to achieve the critical path tasks"*

This is used for Step 4

Step 4 – Actions for Success

The next step requires the team to determine how far they have progressed in achieving the *"Miracle Vision"*, using a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning nothing has been started and 10 defined as achieving the goal. Having agreed upon the number, or range of numbers, the team lists the successes they have accomplished to get to the number. It is important that credit is taken for accomplishments, no matter how small they may seem. The facilitator asks questions to motivate identification of the accomplishments. For example:
- "Where do parts of the "*Miracle Vision"* happen already?"
- "When have things similar to the "*Miracle Vision"* already happened ?"
- "How did you do that?"
- "How did you manage to get as far as you have?"

This technique facilitates the understanding that small steps can allow movement toward achieving the solutions.

Example

After some discussion, the team agreed that they were about a ***"4"*** *on the scale and listed the following successes already accomplished to get to the* ***"4":***

- *A milestone schedule has already been completed*
- *The overall project progress measured against the schedule is reported monthly*
- *Some of the contractor's schedules have been integrated into the overall project schedule*

These are used for Step 5

Step 5 – Arriving at the Destination

Stimulated by acknowledging their accomplishments, the team brainstorms what actions (small steps) they can take to continue the journey, moving closer to the "perfect 10" of the *"Miracle Vision"*. Able to be achieved quickly, they are just as valuable as large steps, setting the momentum and heading in the right direction. The team decide who has the skills necessary to lead and complete the action effort. This "Action Owner" establishes a completion date, which is recorded as a target and for future measurement.

Care must be taken to ensure there are a reasonable number of actions selected, for too many will overwhelm the team. If many actions are identified, the three to four top priority actions are selected. The remaining will be tasked later once the initial ones are completed.

History has demonstrated that frequently actions are never completed as a result of conflicting priorities. For this step of the process to be successful, the "Action Owner" must see the value for completing the action, often expressed as "What is in it for me?" The facilitator must encourage the team to express how the completion of the activity will bring value to the overall project and that they depend on the "Action Owner" to meet the commitment. The sense of value to the team is one of the greatest incentives in keeping the priority high and meeting the completion date.

A clear definition of when the action is considered as completed is also developed. This is especially important for actions that take longer and which may require intermediate completion milestones dates to keep the activity focused.

As part of the workshop follow-up, the team establishes the process for reviewing the success of the actions, typically weekly or bi-weekly. This allows for continued support of the "Action Owner's" and affirms the progress being made toward achieving their "Miracle Vision". This also provides a forum for the introduction of new issues and the re-assessment of solution priorities on an ongoing basis. Progress is measured by re-visiting the 1 to 10 *"Miracle Vision"* scale and establishing the number, higher up the scale toward the *"Miracle Vision"*. Some teams publicize their achievements by graphically displaying progress on the scale with highlights of the solution accomplishments.

The Performance Alignment Process is repeated as needed until the overall project is completed.

Example

The team brainstormed what small (and quick) actions they could take to demonstrate progress and came up with the following actions:

- *Review existing schedule and establish the activities that are on the critical path to project completion and align team on critical actions*
  ACTION OWNER: Fred Moore DATE: 22 Nov
- *Determine responsible persons for critical activities and review potential risks to not meeting schedule*
  ACTION OWNER: Bill Anderson DATE: 29 Nov
- *Ensure site managers understand delivery expectations and encourage proactive issue identification / solutions finding approach*
  ACTION OWNER: Bill Anderson DATE: 04 Nov
- *Develop recovery plans for identified high risk activities and present to the team in the weekly meetings*
  ACTION OWNER: Activity Owners DATE: 08 Dec

Action progress was monitored by Bill during his weekly meetings in addition to day to day personal support of the action owners.

Performance Alignment - development experience

The Performance Alignment Process has been implemented in more than 20 alignment sessions in large project environments. It has tailored the traditional Solutions Focus approach and terminology to words and approaches accepted by the teams being aligned. Success of any alignment workshop is dependant upon how willing the team members are to want to develop the path to success. Team's eager for success follow the process and begin to achieve results immediately. In cases where teams still want to follow the "Problem Talk" process, success is somewhat slower due to their focus on "what went wrong". These teams also require additional expediting to achieve solutions on schedule. Experience has shown that transition toward a Solution-Focused approach can be accomplished by additional pre-workshop team member coaching (in the interview process). This stresses the importance of the Facilitator's role in understanding the dynamics of the team members and guiding them on achieving success.

Conclusion

This article looks at the key elements teams must be aligned on. It provides a definition for alignment and how to approach the development of solutions to difficult issues on projects. It stresses the importance of the facilitator's interaction to transition individuals' behaviour from a "Problem Talk" approach to one where they are seen as a "solutions finders".

The 5 steps used in the Performance Alignment Process provides a simple "Solutions Focused" approach to identifying and prioritizing issues within multi-cultural environments. It was seen that the key to its successful application was the Leadership's and the Facilitator's skills in encouraging the entire team to actively participate in achieving the "Miracle Vision". Finally, the rigorous measurement of the progress of actions assigned to individuals proactively identifies areas that are working well and opportunities that close attention should be paid. Monitoring issues resolution progress and affirming successes along the journey are key to completing tasks according to schedule.

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Solution-Focused Work Design

Stephan Teuber & Claudia Heizmann

SF-Lean Management in Offices: How to speed up and improve your Office Work

Keywords: Office Efficiency/Excellence, Lean Management, Solution Focus, Kaizen

Summary

When considering improving working processes, the producing sector usually occupies centre stage in the mind of entrepreneurs or chief executives. In this particular sector Kaizen methods and other management concepts were and are successfully implemented. But what about administration and service activities? In accordance with the principle "My desk is my castle", every single office worker defends her/his own working organisation. Chaos in office is therefore considered to be a personal problem.

Anyway, office workers almost immediately benefit from activities to improve office work in case Solution Focus and Kaizen Philosophy are combined. Doubts and sometimes even fear concerning further bureaucracy give way to experiencing considerable support in complex working processes. The translation of the program into action takes place directly at the workplace. Part of the philosophy is the “immediate-principle” as well as simplicity and self-responsibility. The office employees themselves represent the improvement task force translating the office improvement into action and maintaining it. Eventually their change of attitude towards Solution-Focused thinking and acting is crucial.

Unlike other concepts of office management, Solution-Focused thinking and acting doesn’t require detailed and expensive workflow analysis by external consultants. Questions like “Why did this or that not work in the past?” are obsolete.

The every day obstacles and the weaknesses in office work are well-known and lots of work-flow manuals have already been written! The key question is: What kind of solution is necessary to speed up and improve your work in the office?

Digging for Treasures

Encouraged and motivated employees, better services *and* lowered (search) costs! Believe it or not: This dream can come true!

Some facts about German offices in brief:

- 13 % of the total working time of German employees' is required to look for all kinds of documents.
- German employees deal 72 minutes a day with E-Mails. They receive 22 E-Mails in 24 hours on average. Only a third contain relevant information.
- 70% of customer complaints are caused in the administrative sector.
- Merely 1 % of total working time is value adding.

What a waste of time and money! The Kaizen-Institute in Bad Homburg found out that each employee wastes 15,4 hours a week with the above mentioned activities. The treasures to be digged are:

35 % of time and 50 % of space in an ordinary German office.

The Seven Office Pitfalls

Fraunhofer Institute für Produktionstechnik und Automatisierung in Stuttgart identified the following errors:

1. *Information Overflow*: More information (E-Mails, reports, memos etc.) than needed
2. *Useless Information Transport:* documents are moved from workplace to workplace; useless documents are stored
3. *Bad spatial arrangement:* Employees looking for documents in (distant) offices of their colleagues; architectural office deficiencies
4. *Waiting time:* Time consuming decisions, waiting for documents, waiting for the printer/copy machine
5. *Useless services:* Reports read by nobody; lots of redundant copies; repeated data input
6. *Useless Documents:* Documents of already finished projects; unused data; multiple storage
7. *Mistakes:* Data Input; handwritten documents/notes that are not readable

The ordinary every-day-office-errors are identified. But how to increase productivity in the so-called unproductive sector?

Background Information: Lean Management and Kaizen

Considering the opportunities of office improvement, Lean Management programs now enter the world of office work. In short: *Offices are "industrialized"*! Fujitsu Services UK, Canadian postal services and General Motors are benchmarks of the development.

Kaizen, the philosophy of continuous improvement, was developed by the Japanese automotive sector. The core of the concept is to avoid not value adding (office) processes and to replace them by value adding processes. Kaizen starts at the shopfloor level (Imai 1994, p. 302). Progress is made step by step – following an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary principle. Besides Kaizen represents a mindset and not a concrete plan of action (Imai 1994, p. 307). Additionally, self-organisation is enforced. The Kaizen principles are the following (Leikep/Bieber, p. 17):

1. Go to Gemba: Potentials occur at the *place of action.*
2. Watch Gembutsu: A thorough understanding of the *real processes and actions* can tell us the reasons of malfunctions.
3. Looking for Muda: Waste of time and money are *treasures* to be digged!
4. Be a Kaizen-employee: *Continuous improvement* gets you on the path of success!

Bearing in mind the mounting dominance of the service sector in Germany which lacks behind in Kaizen application, the enormous potential of improvement is obvious.

Principles of Solution Focus

What are the Solution-Focused means supporting office worker and teams to achieve office excellence? What are the basic principles of Solution Focus?

1. Focussing Resources

Focussing Resources is one of the main characteristics of Solution-Focused action. The employees are the improvement task force as they possess the expertise concerning their work and their workplace. Both, acknowledging the office worker as experts and appreciating their abilities is fertile soil for a successful Lean Management Process.

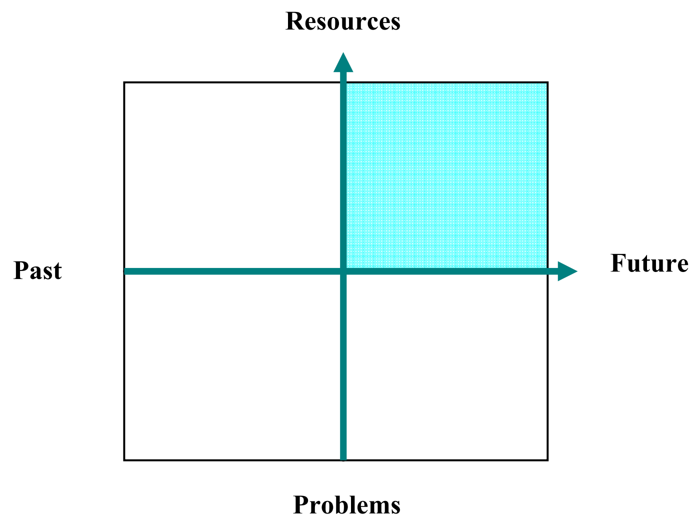

Figure 1: Exploring the Solution Space

2. A Different Perspective

Solution-Focused thinking and acting requires the imagination of a solution space in the future instead of directing the attention to problems in the past e.g. "the workload has doubled in the last couple of years". Due to solution focus thinking a productive change process can be initiated. Solution focus thinking asks for concentrating on future goals instead of maintaining a status quo (de Shazer 1989, p. 69). Employees frequently just do extra work to cope with an increasing amount of work and do not even think about being lazier, easing up or simplifying their working tasks. Losing sight of value adding tasks due to growing workload is accompanied by pareto-inefficient work as the progresses of one workers performance goes along with the losses of other workers.

3. Getting on a New Interpretation Track

Everyday "Problems" are viewed and interpreted in a different way: Employees discover opportunities to cope and act where - up to now - they remained rather paralyzed regarding their current working tasks and workflow. Furthermore workers get on a less fearful Interpretation Track and view Lean Management Initiatives as a vehicle to secure their existing jobs rather than downsizing workforce or outsourcing their department.

4. Generating Short-Term Wins

Short-term wins are critical in every change process but particularly to support ongoing Solution-Focused action. When having found out which kind of action/solution works, this action needs to be enforced (de Shazer 1989, p. 73) e.g. if employees prefer immediate feedback by their supervisor, this effective behaviour has to be continuously stressed. Besides, by regular audits/workshops or rituals like spring-cleaning the house, progression becomes obvious and backs the change process.

Core Questions of Solution-Focused Action

Consultants do have to ask questions that change the view about the present situation, open room for different interpretations, define precisely the present state and finally energize resources for change. The core questions to support office teams are the following:

1. Defining Goals

Defined goals enable the employees to realize when goals are attained. Quite often problems are confusing and not well defined.

- "Which goal would you like to attain?"
- "How do you come to know that your goal is achieved?"

2. Exceptions

First of all consultants have to initiate the employees' search for exceptions. To look for exceptions creates imaginations about situations in which the desired goals were achieved in part or in total. Resources and competences are activated by the following questions:

- "Which resources do you have to achieve your goals?"
- "Which action or behaviour has been or is effective in similar situations?

3. Self-estimation and progress

Self-estimation with Scaling-methods allow employees to discover the progress in the Lean Management process:

- "How will you realize that you have done some progress? What will be the difference?
- "What kind of landmarks reveal that your situation has been improved? How will your customers / colleagues figure an improved situation?

Reaping the Benefits of Solution-Focused Lean Management

Our 4-stage process starts with a better self-organisation of the employees: (1) They learn to think and act output-focused while carrying out their every-day work. (2) Afterwards the office teams develop some standards and (3) continue by improving their working processes. Eventually (4) further improvement is sustained. The results of the 4-stage process are:

- Instead of looking for all kinds of documents the employees' do value adding work.
- Office working tasks are speeded up.
- Better spatial arrangement is achieved.
- Team-cooperation and motivation is improved.
- Productivity is increased.

The employees become the improvement task force of the change process. Every single office worker is empowered to detect improvement opportunities on his/her own. Management has to delegate responsibilities to the office teams in charge: The main effect is, that every-day work is made much easier.

Motivational Aspects: Self-Responsibility and Leadership

Office worker should be empowered towards more self-responsibility. Self-responsibility and motivation is merely generated if the executives believe in the capabilities of the team members. Believing in team members creates a "Verpflichtungssog" (Sprenger 2005, p. 102) a deeply felt duty to the tasks. Remember: Trust breeds duty, a duty, hardly to escape. And: Mistrust breeds inertia. The law of reciprocity tells us about an equilibrium of give and take, in concrete: Employees you trust are motivated to pay the trust by an active performance on their own. In the end investments in self-responsibility reduce the need – and the costs - of control. Sprenger terms the phenomenon "actively produced vulnerability" (Sprenger 2005, p. 100), caused my managers refusing any sort of intensively felt control. Summing up, the risk, that is accompanied by dis-intensifying the control system, makes employees realize their crucial role in achieving the company's performance.

How to Speed up and Improve Office Work

Office improvement takes place step-by-step directly at the workplace. Because of our "immediate-principle" dynamic change is initiated. As already mentioned, employees themselves are responsible for the change process. The widely spread disease of putting of and postponing work can be cured by a strict schedule.

Stage 1: Increasing Self-Organisation

Increased self-organisation starts with a Tidiness-campaign that basicly consists of:
- Sorting out (unnecessary working material, documents)
- Cleaning the workplace
- Putting working material in good order
- Defining standards
- Ready-Set-Go: The "Immediate-Principle"

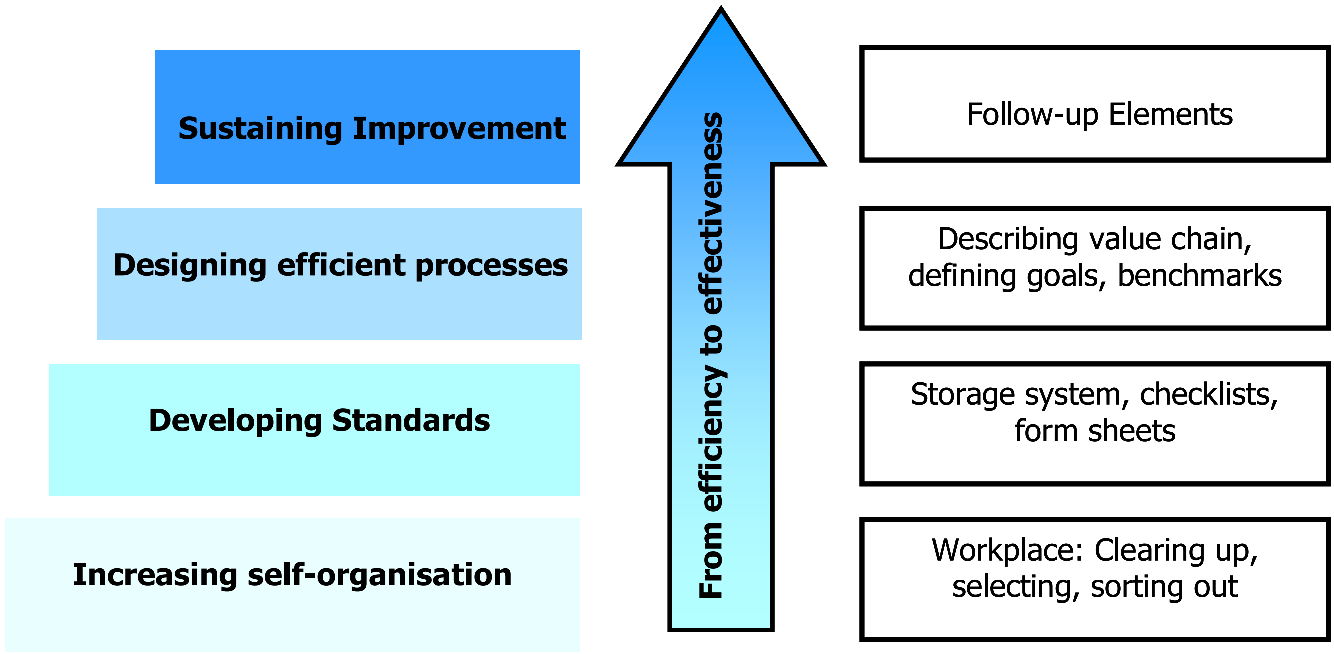

Figure 2: The 4-Stage process to office improvement

Since the benefit of the Tidiness-campaign becomes obvious immediately, a lively and motivated atmosphere is created. The "immediate-principle" avoids the lack of every day practice which quite often characterizes seminars or workshops. Sometimes other teams observing the tidiness-campaign feel encouraged to do "their" tidiness-campaign although "their" change process has not formally started yet.

There is a need of sensitivity ("Fingerspitzengefühl") on behalf of the consultant. Some employees might feel getting caught if working material or documents are detected at their workplace that usually are being stored on a different place. But, a tidy and clearly laid out workplace is convincing even sceptical team members!

Getting rid of working material and all kind of documents provisionally, may support the change process and the employees` acceptance of change. In a certain period of time, office worker can find out, whether they really need certain working material/documents or not. In accordance with the principle "the more used the smaller the distance" every working material gets its fixed place. We usually recommend a U-arrangement.

Stage 2: Developing Standards to Improve Team Cooperation

The following questions and experiences support the development of standards:

- *Checklists:* How can work be made easier?
- *Storage of documents:* Is the present storage system standardized and intuitively designed? Is it possible to abstain from physical storage of particular documents when digital information already exists?
- *Communication:* Do we communicate enough with each other, with other departments, managers or customers? What do we need to inform or to be informed sufficiently?
- *Arrangement of Workplace*: How can we keep a good and efficient atmosphere, even in case of replacement of a colleague?
- *Working Processes*: Are the processes well known and value-adding?
- *Use of working material*: Do we really need every single working material (pencils, envelopes, different kind of paper)?
- *Kanban-System*: How can we make it easier to order working material by establishing a pull-system along the whole value chain?
- *Pictographic Lessons*: How can we support every day work by pinning up pictographic lessons (brief instruction sheets) on printer/copy machine etc. (Leikep/Bieber, p.39)?

To sum up: Stage 2 of the process enables the employees to work more efficiently as working processes are easily understood and performed frictionless.

Stage 3: Redesign of Working Processes

The present processes are analysed, ideas for improvement are discussed in a team-workshop. Two steps are critical when discussing suggestions for improvement:

1. Describing the present state
   - Identifying the critical paths
   - Analysing complaints
   - Required wait time, returns

2. Defining goals
   - Describing the desired output
   - Integrating customer expectations
   - Minimizing redundancies
   - Optimizing the process time

Since the value adding working processes are defined by adopting the customers perspective, productivity is developed in the "right" direction. A major portion of the office work becomes real value-adding.

Stage 4: Sustaining Improvement

Anyway, the first perceived successes are often accompanied by the reemergence of the old habits. It is obviously very important to turn isolated steps into a culture of continuous improvement which is secured by fixed Audits and Lean Management meetings. They have to deal with

- A check of milestones
- Systematic feedback and information
- A rigorous search for excellence

Rituals such as "Efficiency days" or the annual "Tidiness campaign" support the sustaining change process. Quick wins always represent a motivational starting point on the path to sustaining improvement. Those can be easily achieved by a rapid implementation of employees` suggestions for improvement.

Finally, the process-centred reorganisation dramatically reduces interface and overhead costs.

Conclusion

The Solution-Focused Lean Management program leads to a high efficiency organisation. Not like many other programs office workers play an integral part transforming the whole organisation instead of resistance provoking top-down initiatives.

The goal in a four-level process is that the office-employees become the driving force of the solution-process. They learn how to act Solution-Focused and to create an output with every step in their work.

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Thomas Lenz

When Profit-Ability-Teams Outmatch the Business Process Back in Business with Solution Focus

Keywords: Solution-Focused Change Management, Lean Management, Profit Center, Adaptive Company, Workflow Management, Production Ability, Profit Ability Teams, Strategic Management

Introduction

The market has gone, we are still here – retained by our own processes. Any company can be forced to face fast-paced market conditions. Well-defined business processes that worked well in the past are now a dead end. When the process chain becomes the problem, the team´s wisdom is the only solution. Nobody knows better how to respond to mutating rules in a market than the people that work close to it. The Solution-Focused Approach towards Process Management concentrates on people’s ability to create value – and through that brings companies back into business. And it radically changes the way to carry out changes. A Solution Focus Approach releases the reinvention of the operational and organisational structure of a company. Profit Ability Teams (PAT) take over Process Management and Strategy.

Need to start-up instead of further development

What if tomorrow we’d floated our business anew? How would we know? What would our workflow be like? How would we collaborate? What about our teamwork? How much responsibility would each individual obtain? And… how would our customers get to know?

Do companies sometimes wish to reinvent themselves instead of doing soft organisational development? The market gives the answer. Market changes and especially the speed of changes trouble companies. Changing customer behaviour and market environments confuse companies whether to start an economy drive (cut costs) or to invest in new products. Many decisions have to be made, e.g.: Which fields and branches should we concentrate on? Which products are marketable and how fast can they reach our customers? Management systems like the “adaptive company” suggest to take changes as they come and use them to surf the wave instead of sinking like a stone.

How is it done?

Well-known cost-cutting programs withdraw an organisation´s only resource that could find an acceptable way - their employees. When people leave an organisation consequently not only value rises for a short time (though long enough for stocks to bring profit), at the same time production ability drops. Outsourced resources take over. Costs and efforts of managing the workflow interfaces often exceed by far the savings from reduced workforce. The company unlearns to produce their own product even if they concentrate on key competences. It is like crossing rapids with just one hand and half of a foot left.

The next possibility is an organisational development program – e.g. lean management or continuous improvement. These programs closely relate to the people concerned but often use a hidden strategy like finding out whom to fire and whom to work on with – they still concentrate on being more efficient and save costs. Mostly the logic behind is to find out what does not work and then to fix the problem. Programs like these tend to inflame more and more fire sources – and these change tasks start to conflict each other. Change managers therefore literally see their role as internal conflict manager. There again the question is, who wins, who survives, who enters the next company level? Assumably not a very constructive way. In this game the teams fight for their chief´s intent; they fight an outside enemy - even if it is the neighbourhood department. Normally change management is accompanied by teamwork measures and teambuilding seminars. The outcome is uncertain due to too many dark horses (strategy, management skills, willingness of people, personal benefits…). The bottom line is: Do these measures help us to meet the market´s demands fast enough?

Change Management Goals

Companies are looking for ways to

1. keep up with the speed and demands of the market,

2. keep the organisation’s ability to produce products or provide services and

3. to be lean enough to survive financially difficult periods.

Probably sometimes a reason to ask: “Shouldn’t we float our business anew?” Solution Focus – the ideas of Steve de Shazer are radical enough to support organisations in their aim to survive difficult economic situations. A real case shall illustrate this:

The company is a publishing house. In this field the market rules are usually very conservative. The objective is to publish books – not more and not less. On the one hand operative strategies focus on which authors to publish, on the other hand on improving logistics processes like printing, delivering and selling in or to stores. The last link in the process chain – selling to the end-customer – was completely revolutionised by Amazon.com in the last decade. To the publishing houses it seemed just to be a change in their business partners – from the local book dealers to the wholesalers in the Amazon process chain.

The business is also influenced by the conflict between knowing which authors to produce and the budgeting of book projects. Book authors are quite a weak resource. They cost a lot (i.e. money has to be invested in advance long before one single book is sold), they need an unpredictable long time to write and complete a book and they cannot be controlled. So, how should a book project be budgeted? If the book is published only a few weeks too late it may even flop. It is difficult to guess the sales figures whilst planning. Only one book out of thousands is a success. Conservative planning means that almost every second book project is highly risky to fail (if risk is included as a budget task). However the goal of the company stays the same: publishing of books.

The Publishing Industry

During the last ten years publishing companies went through a phase of lean management and process reengineering. The results were streamlined value chains with effective cost accounting and downsized working staff in major working fields like project management and distribution management. Many pennies were saved by reducing staff to the minimum and looking for alternative ways to print. Then Amazon.com came and changed customer's behaviours…

This was the situation before the project start. The alternatives were another downsizing program, another process reengineering in special fields like logistics, a new market strategy or something completely different. And this is what happened.

The company chose not to have a patchwork project but to look at the whole company. The owner picked his best and most trusted people and gathered them for a 4 day-workshop. There they engaged in a couple of questions – facilitated by an external consultant – which consequently followed some basic ideas of Solution-Focused thinking:

Using Solution Focus Questions

The questions were (→ r*elated to SF ideas*):

- "What is it that we are really excellent in?" (→ *if it works, don't change it; scaling)*
- "If we were to start a new business with these abilities – how would this company look like? (→ *if it doesn't work don't do it again. do something different*)
- "What would our competitive advantage be?"
- "Which are the mayor innovations to our internal and external teamwork and workflow?" (→ *miracle question*)

- "How and what for would our customers appreciate our new appearance?" (→*positive appreciation, realations*)
- "How do we have to organise this kind of company?" (→ *tasks*)

The workshop turned the whole company inside out. It was not pretending to start a new business – it actually *was* the re-start of a completely new organisation.

The current excellence of the company's staff turned out to be quite trivial: "We know how to produce successful books." As simple as that. However in front stood an almost philosophical discussion between the financial staff and the project experts. It was the special know-how of certain people, agents, editors, salespeople … to develop the ability to know which authors / which projects can be a success and which not – even before being assessed by the cost accounting team. They figured out that a proper stop-go-decision in a project mostly was made after a period of collecting information, discussions, comparisons, research at book stores and portfolio building. However these people did not formally work together in a group, but were connected by interfaces in the workflow chain. Much information was lost or didn't arrive at the important project partner, who could shorten the process by a simple "yes, we can" or "no, we can't". When it was his turn (e.g. the salesperson to major book stores) it mostly was too late.

Creating Profit Ability Teams (PAT)

The first decision of the company was to boost these teams and their abilities. These multi-functional project teams were called Profit Ability Teams (PAT) and were provided with extensive responsibilities and authorities. Though the idea of profit centres is not new, it was remarkable how consequently the Solution Focus approach pushed the organisational change and workflow.

As profit centres the teams were now responsible for their project success. They could chose as many projects as they thought were reasonable. They had to pay for services they used from the company (e.g. controlling, distribution or promotion). And they were responsible for the profit. A profit and loss accounting was established. A considerable percentage of the profit was promised as a bonus for the team – the profit was divided in a ratio of 1:1 between the team and the company. This meant that the more successful the team managed a project the more they earned.

They acted as a small specialized publishing house. They were free to organise themselves in the most efficient way. They organised communication, collaboration, tasks, roles, responsibilities and decision making. In practice it turned out that some teams engaged experienced booksellers as consultants and benefited from their know-how of market trends and customer behaviour. As a by-product events for perfect customer relations were arranged.

At the end of the year they had to be answerable to the board. It turned out that most of the teams (7 teams were installed) exceeded their goals.

Concerning risks it was a clear rule that teams with a negative performance would have to file for bankruptcy – but in contrast to absolute entrepreneurship the worst thing possible was that the teams were closed and they lost their job. They didn't have to stand up for financial loss. This was still the company's duty.

The ideas that were born for the core project teams should now be launched for the rest of the company. And there was one core question: "How would we do it if we were an external supplier?" (*miracle question*)

The discussion in the workshop showed that a lot of specialists had a lot of perfect ideas for burning questions of internal supplying services (- much more ideas than every continuous improvement project had ever generated). For example the production department came up with the unique idea of "printing on demand", which made it easier to calculate and foresee production costs. The accounting department answered the question by providing an easy to use process-costing-system. Distribution developed new – time-saving – arrangements with logistics suppliers and wholesalers. The teams started to be innovative and entrepreneurial.

It was not just an announcement. They now also were forced to act as profit centres – although the ratio there was not as high as in the PATs. Different arrangements were negotiated, for example distribution was given all the savings they could generate.

Another basis of the new company were Team Interface Agreements (TIA). These agreements contained pricing, service level and penalties. They were executed in a friendly but precise way. The agreements led to more quality and regularly questioned: "How can we improve our customer-supplier-relation? What works out fine and should be kept in this way and what leads us both to better profits?" (*scaling, resources*)

Another important panel were Cross Departmental Workshops where conflicts were solved by discussing the question: "Which measure will increase all of our groups´ profits – without one group losing? Which synergies will bring major benefits?" (Actually again *focusing on solutions*)

Entrepreneurial Thinking – Entrepreneurial Behaviour

The whole company went through a process that could be described as follows: First people thought as entrepreneurs, then they acted as entrepreneurs, then they became entrepreneurs. And indeed some of the supporting departments offered and sold some of their services to interested customers from several branches, e.g. IT came up with an excellent application of an ordering system. The internal IT team was frequently hired as consultants by the software supplier due to their special expertise. In the end this led to a complete spin-off of this department. Since then they sold their services as external consultants to the publishing house - still working in the same house. The owners supported this step by taking an interest in the new company.

The management's role itself was reduced to a supporting function providing contacts to the owners, portfolio management, finance, human resource development and branding. The old leadership and reporting system was completely replaced by a non-hierarchical networking system. Mangers now had a different approach. In former days their job was mainly filled with crisis management and trouble shooting. This was now a task of the PATs. Since the workflow was as trouble-free as never before they could concentrate on strategy- and market oriented tasks like generating completely new markets.

The old venerable publishing house did not exist any longer. It had been replaced by a bundle of specialized and responsible cost centres and a hand full of more or less outsourced supplying teams and companies. But they still worked under one well known brand.

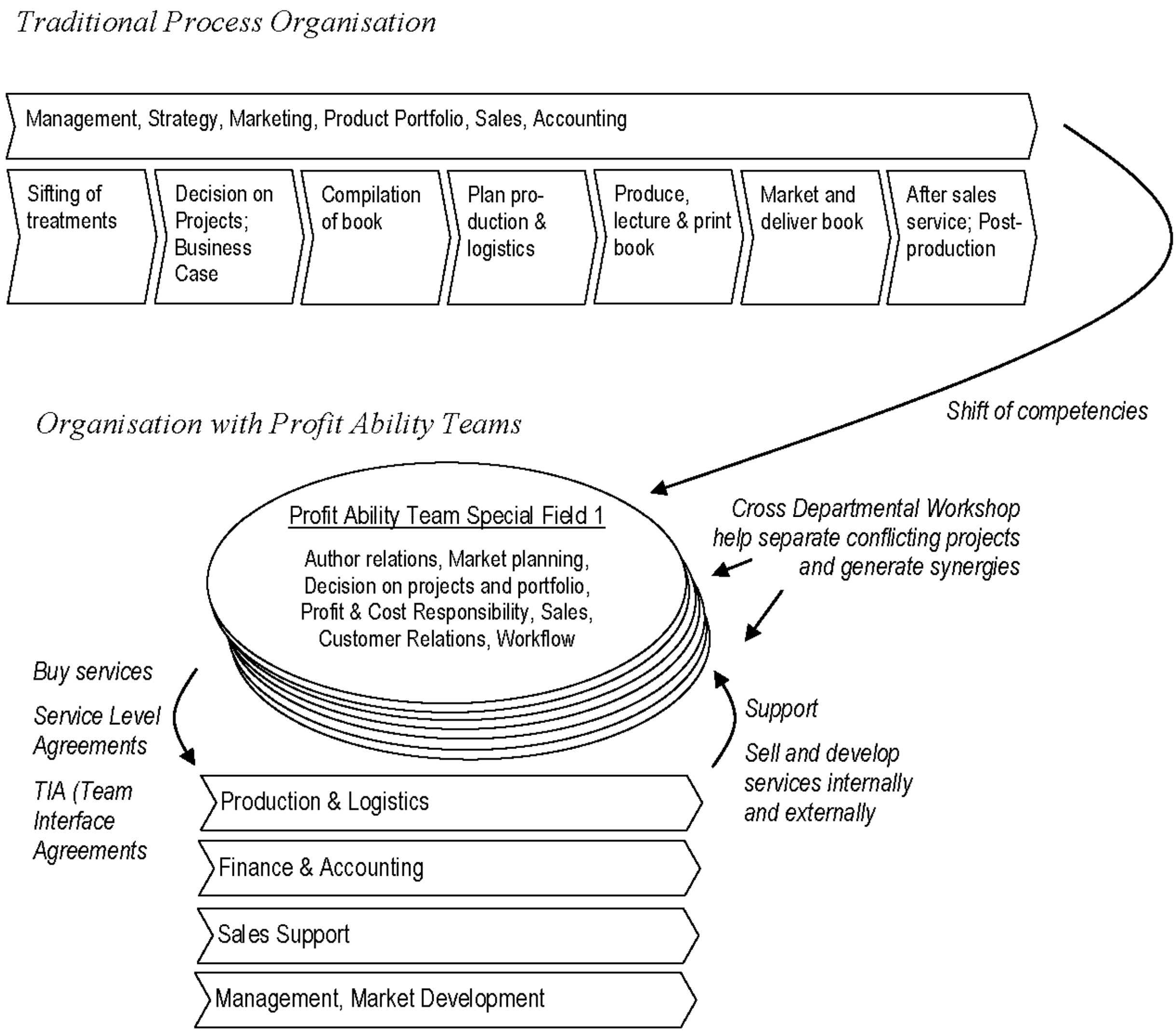

Fig. 1: From Process Management to Profit Ability Teams

Conclusions and Appreciation of the Solution Focus Approach to Workflow Projects

The project was based on several underlying methods. Elements of Kaizen, Lean Management, the Concepts of Profit Centres Management Buy Out, Process Costing, Herzberg´s Motivational Theory, the Adaptive Company and more influenced the way to work. The idea of the Solution Focus as proposed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg was a continuous line. As mentioned before the initial workshop was strictly following Solution-Focused interview techniques. The most important idea for the company was to leave behind patchwork development and head towards a whole future picture. The way questions were asked did not aspire to learn or confront the truth. The consulting team, that facilitated the process, was much more interested in asking questions that invited descriptions of what clients wanted for themselves in the most detailed and most varied way possible. The consulting team invited the staff to think about and define themselves differently by asking about exceptions to problems and the actions clients took. They inquired about feasible steps the clients might take due to their experience and knowledge in order to progress to their own goals. Kim Berg describes it like this: What emerges - often tentatively at first - is a more competent or worthy side of the client – a side previously unnoticed by the client because of overriding frustration with the problem (Klar & Berg: 1999). The influence and the meaningful use of Social Constructivism was essential for designing the steps in the consulting project. Social constructivism maintains that people define and create their sense of what is real through interaction and conversation with others, a form of negotiation carried out within the context of language. This notion is immediately relevant to psychotherapy since, as a "talking cure," it primarily takes place within the context of language (de Shazer and Berg, 1992). The idea of the project was to change the clients thinking of themselves.

Based on these assumptions people were able not only to change themselves but also the way they interacted within and in-between teams and of course how to adapt to difficult external circumstances.

Some of the major cognitions that can be derived from the project are:

1. Team development

The company invested in measures to support personal development for a long time. However if the organisation does not fit it makes no sense. Teams have to be challenged in order to gain a sense of achievement. The essential outcome was that responsibility and the possibility to influence have to fit to each other. Nobody can be called to account for something he can not influence. In addition, if the supervisor often intervenes, the co-worker will not take over responsibility.

2. The Manager's Role

If the manager is convinced that things will not work out without him then things will never work out without him. In such a system it is important not to intervene as soon as things seem to run differently than they were planned. This is the role managers and company owners have to learn.

3. Resistance

Of course there is resistance mainly from the losers in the system. The hierarchy is broken up, many people lose their former secure roles. The change is only successful when you and the former supervisors develop an attractive picture of the future roles. Then the employees can unhand their old roles. The new role descriptions have to be attractive enough to be told at home or to friends. It is very important that the people contribute to the change whilst developing the future. The changes cannot be decreed.

4. The Mental Start-Up

Consultant Erich Weichselbaum puts it like this: The most important statement for the current situation is: "Everything that has happened in the past was okay. Otherwise we wouldn´t have come that far." With this the barrier in the heads is gone. When you start analysing weak points you signal: You've done something wrong. A better approach is to say: Based on our experiences we today have a wide area of knowledge. If we now started-up our company anew, how would we do it? (Weichselbaum: 1998)

In the case of the publishing house this could mean: How would we as publishing house with our today's knowledge found a new company? How would we do it if we had no restrictions?

Take out fear and create acceptance. It is always about trial and error. The new thing enters a contest with the old thing. You always have to leave the possibility that the new thing is not as good as the old thing. This at last creates the chance for a new thing to develop without fear of loss. The energy then turns from conserving to developing. (Weichselbaum: 1988)

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Erika Krenn-Neuwirth

Collaboration in business networks: How the solution focus approach improves cooperation and results

Keywords: networking, business networks, key success factors, Solution-Focused approach, collaboration

We should be the change we would like to see in the world.

Mahatma Ghandi

Abstract

Using Solution-Focused tools and methods in the context of business networks and cooperative situations in companies, expands the chances for sustainable success. To me, working in different cooperative situations and networking structures has revealed the key success factors of Solution-Focused management. Using the principles of Steve de Shazer (de Shazer: 2005)

- if it works don't fix it
- if it works do more of it
- if it doesn't work, do something different

helps to concentrate on the positive developments in business networks as well as in collaborative situations in general. Furthermore SF-tools identify valuable resources for positive change in my experience. Talking about positive exceptions and successes of any size, increases the self esteem of an individual as well as a group as a whole. This fosters an appreciative attitude towards the network members and the co-workers and inspires new solutions in an interdependent process. These solutions are implemented rather quickly, because open discussion of pros and cons in a Solution-Focused attitude reduces the resistance to change on the one hand, the appreciation of the personal resources reassures the individual of its capability to change on the other hand. Experiments (in the sense of very small changes), as they are usually realized in small steps, lower the risk of resistance or the fear of "failing in doing something new".

More importantly- the individual network member consequently takes over the responsibility, as positive feedback strengthens the ties of a group, and each member is valued highly for its contribution. (Goleman 1998, 206 ff). Therefore chances are high that the results aimed for will be achieved more easily.

Working together in an appreciative atmosphere and having a clear benefit in mind thrills and inspires network members to surprising results.

Introduction

Collaboration in business networks is going to be one of the most challenging questions to cope with globalization and the increased flexibility in working relationships. Especially in Austria's Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME), which count for 90% of the operating business this is a frequently discussed topic. Talking about one-man-shows, Austria has more than 50 %of all enterprises in this size. In the consulting branch this figure even climbs up to 70%.

Collaboration is therefore a question of survival and growth.

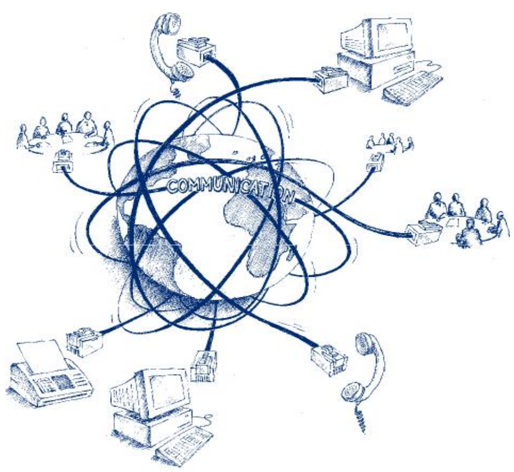
In the EU there are 99% SME, and 6, 6 Million enterprises with less than ten employees. (EU SME-Report2002)There are similar developments, so networking of businesses is going to be an interesting alternative to forming larger enterprises.

Functioning networks are based on shared visions, a common business approach, win-win situations for members and clients, mutual trust and clear working relationships(legal agreements), interdependencies and shared risks.(Krenn-Neuwirth 2005 pg.15, Scheff 1999,pg 59ff)

Having learned about the different expectations and outcomes in business networks (3 consultants networks, 1 craftsmen network), I have tried to track some of the key success factors of networks when using the Solution-Focused tools (SF-tools).

One of the consulting networks is based on a systemic approach, one is a learning network in a SF-mode, and one is an expert network using some of the SF tools, when appropriate. So "Finding out what works and do more of it ", as to quote Steve de Shazer, is the aim of my observations and experiences in this paper

How can the solution focus approach contribute in the collaboration process of networks?



First I have a look at the methods and tools which I use in networking processes and second I work out key success factors of business networks and SF ideas which contribute to the improved implementation of action plans, working relationships and generating new solutions, ideas, learning experiences and products.

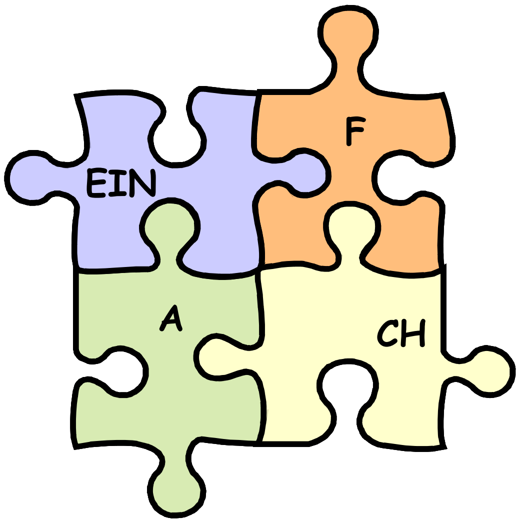
Methods

Based on Mark McKergows and Paul J Jackson's model "Simple"(Jackson/McKergow 2002, p. 11), I developed a German version of the model called *einfach - besser* (*simply better*), which transferred the major principles and tools, the authors have been training on since years.

I use this model in networking as a basic orientation.

Principles of *einfach* (simply):

- Focus on solutions
- Interdependent interactions foster new solutions
- Stick to every day language, (5 $ words as Insoo Kim Berg says)
- Clear the wish for change- is there a client-behaviour observable?
- Any case is different
- Use any type of resource (present, past, future)
- Where is the solution already working in parts?



Tools *besser* (better):

- Build a basis for communication and working relationship
- Experiment with new solutions in tiny steps
- Find any type of strengths or things well done and compliment on them
- Use the miracle question
- Scaling
- Work with resources

Working with these tools in collaborative tasks in networks helped to

- Install a working relationship rather quickly
- Using resources open-minded
- Develop inspiring working constellations
- Concentrate on the main task

- Find surprising solutions
- Enjoy quick wins
- Get different points of views aligned more easily
- Reduce the problem analysis to the absolute minimum
- Forget about scapegoats

The most useful questions in Solution-Focused working conversations are in my experience:

Wonderful, how did you manage to do this?

Every time a network coordinator uses Solution-Focused wording, co- workers feel:
”accepted, valuable, perceived and positive”, as they say.

It is always surprising to observe how the body language changes. Observations include moving into an upright position, relaxed facial expression, sudden smiles and laughter, changes in breathing -“even” in a stressful situation.
As a consequence of feeling fine, people are willing to share their experience to a larger amount. It seems to me that their open mind is fruitful to a helpful attitude in the group. There is a higher level of individual motivation even in critical situation, stated by the group members.

What works?

Looking for the “what works” focuses the group’s interest on the successful contributions and the valuable doings, - what should be increased and expanded?

Complaints can be seen as a welcomed new point of view, which will be reframed in a positive Solution-Focused way.

When a critical situation develops it can be helpful for a network coordinator to ask for exceptions from the “problem”. Then the search for the positive change (already happening) starts and the upcoming answers allow using it immediately.

New facts are strengthening the process- additional examples expand the courage.

Being confident, that there is a possible solution, leads to the next question:

What do we do, instead of, the "problem" there is….?:
Suppose, there is no problem anymore, what else is …(in the place, instead)……?
Or use the miracle question (Sparrer 2002 pg.55).

> Asking the miracle question needs a well built communication basis for the network coordinator, as it is still uncommon in business to use the metaphor of a miracle. Once accepted as a communication standard in a network- it works well.

Another helpful question to find more resources, types of solutions and ideas, is simply:

What else?

> It opens up the field of possibilities, and often repeated - it fosters additional chances.

Within the scaling model, the network gets valuable insights into personal points of view, without discussing more right or wrong or why-questions, as these are questions to justify. For the network coordinator it is important to ask for the difference of half a point higher on the scale.

How can we move up half a notch?

Just talking about these small differences allows the group to gain ideas and possible solutions. Collective learning about the chances to work easier and more efficiently with a good self-perception is an important benefit of collaboration.

Success factors in business

Observing business networks and working as a consultant to networks, as well as a managing member of a federal consultant network, I realized that the following themes are fostered by a Solution-Focused approach:

Success factors in networks	Success factors of SF management
a shared vision, a clear strategic position,	A future oriented way of thinking, emerging futures by using the miracle question, SF-description of ways of thinking, doing, feeling and experiencing a new situation, taking the next small step in the right direction….
Clearing a market value for every member(self-interest) and fitting with complementary competencies (strength) of each other member	The member is the expert in knowing what is good for him and SF questions help to find out
Common goals make common sense	Co-creating the solution in interdependent processes- everyone takes over responsibility and is part of the game
Added value through cooperation for the client and the network members (thinking in win-win- win situations creates a triple benefit)	Using the best potential, resources from the present, the past and the future, working with “higher” spirits in the group improves the results
An even balance of giving and taking over the time; an investment of time, money and energy which pays off.	Respectful working habits and the concentration on compliments and successes encourage a helpful attitude. Free-rider effects turn out more quickly.
Shared accountability for results with clear structures and working rules. Talking about delays/deviation as a learning opportunity phases of reflection for collective learning	Developing a set of constructive rules, thinking in terms of everything can be a resource (e.g. what’s the good in the bad?), open learning possibilities, no search for scapegoats, being confident and open minded, using tools as the reflective SF Team
Taking over responsibility in turns: having agents of the network instead of nominal members	Working with the intrinsic motivation
Trust, time and territory: Constant frequency for meetings- sufficient personal communication space	Appreciative work situation and self-organizing management approaches: The working member knows best what to do, but sometimes he/she needs some encouragement (instead of orders or advice)
Structured meetings for the evaluation of progress, helpful misunderstandings and to discuss the customer satisfaction as well as the member satisfaction	Focused on implemented solutions as results, using scaling tools for progress description points out what to do next
Developing improved solutions in collaboration as the impact and the acceptance of each member raises	A set of actions emerge in the SF process without analyzing the collaboration troubles in detail, using more of the existing potential and resources of the partners

The key success factors for networks are also supported to a large extend by Axel rod's findings. Summarizing, there is the best strategy for a good functioning group to be nice, forgiving, retaliatory and clear in the way they are working together, to achieve their goals (cp. Axelrod 1984).

Whenever a group is in a non zero game, so that there is a winning position for the group and the member, it is reasonable to offer cooperation (prisoner's dilemma). Then it is wise to forgive if a member tries to cheat but changes his mind before doing so. In the case of betrayal the members need to find sanctions and they have to be clear about what is going to happen. A predictable behaviour is useful in the case of cooperation.

That means that networks are functioning successfully, when members find a balance in revolving turns of giving and taking in small steps. A tit for tat fosters successful strategies of cooperation and mutual benefit. These networks develop security and trust in these repeated processes. A sharing attitude is growing by repeating solution cycles and quick wins. To help sticking to this- for the group wise- strategy (and not starting free rider behaviour), each member has to take risks for retaliative disadvantages. So according to Axelrod defective behaviour should find some revenge (cp. Axelrod 1997).This improves the track record.

Solution-Focused management tools are helpful tools to concentrate on the positive effects. Successful networks have a strong hold on the soft facts of collaboration, but without a clear shared vision the benefit of collaboration will diminish quickly.

Never hit on a man's head, when your fingers are between his teeth.

Ghana's saying

Practical experience

You don't need to know what's good, to know what's better.

Steve de Shazer

Learning networks

Exchanging know- how and experiences within expert networks (cp. Lengrand 2002, pg 33ff) is a demanding task, as there is usually also a competitive market perspective included. The main intent of learning networks is to increase the group's knowledge and to develop best practise.

Solution-Focused management helps to develop an appreciative attitude towards the fears of the individual expert to "loose" a competitive edge or a knowledge advantage. Working with tiny experiments, changing with small steps and having a common goal in mind transports the success stories and builds trust. .It is advantageous to walk the talk and use an exemplary attitude as a SF-network coordinator. As networking and knowledge sharing is one important impact to growth for business, it is important for managers to develop a deeper understanding of what works:

Using knowledge in a group has 4 dimensions(Grasenick 2005):

- Expertise: knowing that there is know-how, getting to use it on a formal or informal basis either by talking to people or using a data base
- Accessibility. Get the expertise within a necessary/sufficient time frame
- Commitment: feeling obliged to deliver the knowledge, taking time to exchange information
- Trust: Ask for help without acquiring disadvantages

In networks like international teams (it is important to take the following experiences into account (cp Ross 2006):

- Have face to face meetings at least once in the start phase
- Try to experience the individual and cultural communication style with a personal contact
- Have a face to the name – and a picture on the web
- Be clear about the common goal and the individual expectations, as the network members should work coordinated
- Make the work results visible and give chances for remarks and comments
- Share best practises and give credit to the team
- Use ongoing feedback and compliments as a network coordinator
- Use project management tools in a SF-way
- Make individual results, experience, know-how visible and refer members for advice
- Take cultural differences and divergent socialisation modes into account

To sum it up, usually we trust people who we think are competent. At least as competent, as we think, we are. Therefore it is important to feel competent ourselves (at least in some areas as a resource) and to help others to develop this resource.

Marketing networks

Networks with the aim of a common marketing platform usually need to combine alternative core competences for a “better service or product” for the client.

Building trustful relationships on a highly competitive market is a rather strong challenge for the group members. Depending on the closeness or distance of the co-workers, and the frequency of their personal meetings, a network coordinator will provide sufficient opportunities to get in contact and to communicate. Even with the best technical support, a successful network builds on personal input and relation. So next to the "personal chemistry" members bring in their business experience. It is important to develop clear benefits and investment decisions for each member. With cleared expectations and a shared vision it is easier to turn opportunities into successes.

For the network coordinator it can be fruitful to use SF-tools to develop a common communication basis when the group starts, as well, when there are new members to be integrated. Especially using SF- wording for a starting interview, to find out what are the individual goals and investments of the new member, is a helpful tool. In addition, a positive atmosphere and open questions for the difference –in the sense of "what is better with the network?"-, help to find out the intention and the fitting with the group. In my experience these SF conversations seem to develop in-depth experience for both partners. Having their strengths in mind and talking about their successes inspires the next move.

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Solution-Focused Coaching

Kirsten Dierolf

Solution Focus as a Way to Break Through Complexity

Keywords: Complexity, solution finding processes, causality, transparency, joining through language, Regulatory Affairs

Introduction

Solution-focused solution finding processes are not only useful for inducing change in human interactions, they might be applicable whenever one is dealing with a complex system that defies analysis or computation. This article describes one example where it worked.

The Goal – the Situation

Late in 2005, a friend and manager of an agrochemical company called me up to tell me about a difficult situation he was facing with a European Team. The team consisted of international experts with very different expertise, lawyers, technical experts, scientific experts, and regulatory affairs experts. Their goal was to find an optimal company strategy in view of two possibly changing European directives and strategy papers. They had already met a couple of times and although fruitful, it was very difficult to move forward given the high complexity of the issue: Whenever there was a glimpse of a solution in one corner, twenty “yes, buts” raised their ugly heads in the other. The question obviously was, whether solution focus could be helpful in such a situation.

We usually say that Solution-Focused processes are applicable in so many fields because it is mostly about human interaction. Be it in business, in therapy, in conflict resolution, or team training, solution focus is a good way of helping people change quickly and sustainably. However, in this case, we were only talking about a limited human relationship component. It was not that the team had difficulties amongst themselves or that they wanted to change their way of working together, they needed to find a promising strategy that would fit with technical, legal, scientific, and governmental parameters.

Theoretical Background

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote “The belief in causality is the superstition.“ (Wittgenstein, 1973) Things happen after one another, but that does not necessarily mean that they are bound by laws of cause and effect. If you focus your awareness on a very simple context (thereby blocking out everything else that is happening), cause and effect seem to make sense: I prick a balloon with a pin – it explodes. The closer you look, however, the more complicated it gets. Choosing the scope of the problem influences how we think we can deal with it and how difficult or solvable it appears to us. (Kennedy, 2001)

Interpersonal relations or psychological problems are very complex if you take into account the whole context. (Axelrod, 2001) They become so complex and interrelated that even an analysis seems impossible, let alone a solution. This is, in my view, why traditional psychology resorted to classification and diagnoses – simplifications and generalizations to make manageable the unmanageable. This also explains why effective solution finding processes in complex situations are very similar to one another independent of the diagnosis attributed to the problem.

Solution Focus makes it possible to start a change in the desired direction without having to reduce the complexity of the context. Knowing that the context and the influencing parameters are ever changing in human relations, Solution-Focused practitioners do not care to plan and control the solution finding process from realizing that there is a problem to final solution in detailed steps – it is simply not possible. (de Shazer, 1994)

The problems that solution focus had already proven to work with and the more technical or political problem my client was facing had one thing in common: their complexity and ever changing context. And this is what led us to believe that a Solution-Focused process would be a good means to help the group to move ahead.

The Process

Before we started to work, there was an extensive briefing about the issues at hand. I was sent an impressive stack of legal and technical documentation to read. As Solution-Focused practitioner, I was wondering whether I should actually read all of the information which one could interpret as belonging to the problem and not to the solution. In this case, I decided against my long developed Solution-Focused intuition and read everything diligently. We also had half a day’s briefing with the public affairs consultants and the customer to help me understand what exactly “the problem” was.

It later turned out that this was a very useful thing to do. Through talking about the problem and about the attempted solutions, I found my way into the language and grammar of the team and that was very helpful in two ways: One, it made joining the team and collaborating for a solution much easier, there was no irritation about “why is she here" or "she doesn't even know anything about our business, how can she help us"? Two, in the process, I could distinguish between when someone was talking about a solution and when someone was engaging in less useful analysis of why something would not work. Given the highly technical and legal terminology, this would otherwise hardly have been possible to do.

At the team meeting, I gave a short introduction into solution focus and why I think this process would work for this issue. The analogy of the "game of life", a seemingly easy system governed only by a few rules, which is still mathematically intractable, convinced most team members that it would not help to keep analyzing the problem in all its facets and that solution focus could offer a way out. The transparency of the process and its rationale created a lot of trust in the group and immediate collaboration.

After the presentation, the process that we went through could be described as a mixture between Daniel Meier's (Meier 2005) solution circle, ideas from Mark McKergow's and Paul Z. Jackson's "The solutions focus" (McKergow and Jackson 2002), and the structure of an individual Solution-Focused interview:

Goals of the meeting (plenary)
- Fast Forward to final feedback round:
- It is now 15:30, ladies and gentlemen, we are finished with the session. Could you please give me a summary of what you have reached?

Overall goals of the process (two groups)
- Two working groups describing specific, concrete wished for outcomes of the industry regarding the overall process regarding both changing legislations

Scaling – where are you now? (plenary)
- 10 goal was completely reached, 1 the opposite
- A scale on the flipchart
- Each person can put in a sticky dot where they think they are

Platform building working in pairs / then collected and clustered on pin-board
- What is already working a little bit?
- Where are the exceptions to the problem?
- What are your resources?
- Any signposts to solutions?

Looking at the problem from the side of the solution (Whole Group)
- Traditional form of the Miracle Question
- Perspective Changes (How would commission, farmers etc. notice a solution)
- What would the relevant stakeholders see you doing that you are not doing now?
- What would commission be doing?
- What would member states be doing

Small Steps
- A Scaling Walk

Action Plans
- Who?
- What?
- When?

Customer Feedback

Three weeks after the very successful workshop, Felix Hirschburger of Resourcefulsearch interviewed the client to find out what had happened in the meantime and what – if anything – had been especially useful in our process. We scheduled the interview after the next group meeting of the client because, as we know with coaching or therapy sessions, the real change happens outside of the interaction with the coach or therapist. In the follow-up interview, the client said that immediately after the session he would have assessed the usefulness of the workshop at a 6 or 7. However, after the next meeting of his group, he saw that a lot had changed and rated the helpfulness of the session at an 8.

"In this case it turned out that when we looked back in the next meeting at the action points that we had taken from the meeting that people had actually followed up on these action points. They had all done it, they were motivated to do something with it."

When asked what was most useful for the group, the client answered that concentrating on the things that were already working helped the most:

"The most helpful element I thought was that part where people were forced to think about things that do work in the current system. ... we still have people from that group who in current meetings say: "I know I should not say 'but'" So this approach apparently has staid well with the group. It is a new mindset but it is difficult, especially in this business because there are certain parts in it where it is very hard to find anything that works."

They also discovered what can be done and what is not possible in complex situations and found an efficient a way to deal adequately with complexity:

"Getting more insight in the fact that when you talk about highly complicated systems or processes that it is useless to try and attempt to analyze the entire causal relationships within that process. If you try to do that, ... you can only feel that you are in control of things if you totally oversimplify the situation. ... You run the risk of losing too many elements out of sight. ... (Understanding) that in combination with the small scaling steps approach is something where I say: Ok, it is really good to acknowledge that you cannot oversee the entire process for the next two or three years -- where do you want to be in the absolute ideal situation and what would be necessary to ever get there. Not try and map out the entire route, because tomorrow there

will be a change in another legislation, there will be a change in European government, and then you don't need to be a follower of the chaos theory to understand that any small change can throw the system that you so carefully thought out and that would be very frustrating. So just concentrate on the next few small steps. On the one hand keep your eyes on the goal at the horizon, and at the same time concentrate just on the next few steps you have to make rather than stay sitting there and waste your time on planning the entire route which will change anyway."

Conclusion

Looking at the possibilities that solution focus solution finding processes offer in other areas than issues of human interaction seems to me a promising area for testing and research. As we are just in the beginning of realizing that this might be possible, I would be very happy about contact and information on other projects and approaches, and of course, about possibilities to see if this will work a second time.

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Random Micro Solution-Focused Work - Or why a random coaching machine might be a better coach

Keywords: Solution-Focused coaching, random questions, brief coaching settings, random micro coaching

Summary

Solution-Focused work is without doubt successful and very useful for a lot of situations. Nevertheless, this approach offers a lot of potential that has not been explored so far because of the narrow definition most practitioners use. Solution-Focused work could be even more appropriate and useful in situations and settings that cannot (or only partly) be covered with the present understanding, if it would offer a wider range of Solution-Focused activities.

This article briefly analyzes a common Solution-Focused coaching definition, and shows how our understanding of each single aspect of this definition not only restricts us as coaches in our work, but also neglects potential target groups. To capture more of this hidden potential we have to explore new forms of Solution-Focused work.

Random micro coaching invites us to think about the optimal length of a coaching session, as well as about the way practitioners derive their questions. This approach not only proposes to ask coaching questions randomly but also to offer brief (or micro) coaching settings. Get involved in it and explore the advantages of random micro Solution-Focused work.

The Solution-Focused community is getting bigger, more and more studies, articles and books about the way coaching works are being written, and Solution-Focused approaches are meanwhile being applied to organisational issues and transferred into other fields of life (McKergow 2004: 9). According to Jackson and McKergow, Solution-Focused work is a “powerful, practical and proven approach to positive change” (Jackson and McKergow 2002: 1). These are only some examples that show that Solution-Focused work is not only successful but also spreading around the world.

Nevertheless, this approach offers a lot that has not been explored so far. On the one hand, the transfer into different fields promises a lot of interesting and yet undiscovered benefits and synergy effects. On the other hand, a lot of potential still lies in the approach itself. If we look closer we realise that many practitioners use quite a narrow definition which restricts them.

Solution-Focused coaching is often constructed in the following or a similar way: a) There is a client b) with a serious problem c) who has to contact d) a coach who asks e) a lot of questions f) in a certain way.

Such a definition destroys much of the potential in different and yet related ways. Although this is a very common definition among practitioners, it is important to notice that this construction is only one of many possibilities! There are other constructions and definitions of Solution-Focused work which suit much better situations that are not covered by the above and which could open completely new ways.

Let’s consider the above construction in detail and see if it could make sense to define certain aspects differently:

a) There is a client (...) I agree with the opinion that there has to be some kind of client to work with. The question rather is the following: What criteria define a client? And do they have to be the way we defined them? There seems to be much agreement on these criteria. If you think about your clients you may notice for example that they all have a problem, that they contacted you, that they want to change something, that they know that you are the coach and they are the client, etc. Could you imagine to work with people with opposite criteria, e.g. with people who don’t know that you coach them or who don’t know (yet) that they have a problem, or who have never contacted you? These people might not be the clients we are used to. Nevertheless, a solution focus could also be very useful to them. Imagine that you are at work and suddenly your colleague asks you: “How would you realize this evening that today was a very good day?” I’m sure that you could benefit from this question. Even though you didn’t want to change something before the question or you are not a client, you might benefit from questions like these. This indicates that a lot of people who have not yet been coaching clients or will never be coaching clients could nevertheless benefit from Solution-Focused questions. In this sense the usually narrow definition covers only a part of the whole possible range.

b) (...) with a serious problem (...) There are a lot of potential clients who don’t have a problem that is serious enough to contact a coach. They usually deal with these less dramatic questions and decisions by themselves. Some of these questions are easily solved without help from outside, some of them are trickier. A situation, a decision or a question has to reach a certain value on a dramatic scale before our clients contact us. You might have worked with clients who had problems at work or within the family and who have tried lots of things before they came to you. But have you ever worked with someone who didn’t know what to cook for dinner or what to wear tomorrow? In the beginning this idea might seem funny, but if you explore this question, you suddenly realize that there are many situations like these where a solution focus could be helpful even though the situation is not very problematic. It becomes clear that there are a lot of questions, decisions and problematic situations in one’s life, but that only a very small number of these are taken into a coaching session. The field of simple, not very dramatic, questions is far larger. There are a lot more potential clients, than we can imagine today, if we manage to create an appropriate and beneficial Solution-Focused setting for them.

c) (...) who has to contact (...) Clients usually have to contact the coach to schedule the first meeting. For some people, this first step is very difficult for a variety of reasons: On the one hand, they might not know anything about Solution-Focused coaching or where to find a good coach. On the other hand, they might be afraid because they don't know what will happen during a Solution-Focused coaching session or because they don't want to talk to someone that they don't know. A person who has a less important issue is unlikely to overcome her inhibitions. But this does not mean that a solution focus could not be very helpful to her or even lead her to a better solution. To get more clients we therefore have to ask ourselves how we can decrease the inhibition threshold of contacting us.

d) (...) a coach who asks (...) Does it have to be a coach who asks these helpful questions? Or could everybody do this? I agree with people who think that it takes a lot to become a good Solution-Focused practitioner. But I am also convinced that everybody can ask helpful Solution-Focused questions. Maybe most of the people ask such questions without knowing it. But does it have to be a human being or could a computer do the same job? In the thinking of constructivism, the coach, in her own world, can never know what question fits best. So she simply chooses a question from a set of questions in her mind and hopes that this is helpful. This is something that a programmed computer with thousands of Solution-Focused questions could easily do. You could even tell it to ask the questions in a certain order. There might be a lot of reasons why this is not a good idea. However if we focus on the advantages we may realize, for example, that for people who don't want to talk about their problem, a computer-coach might even be the better choice.

e) (...) a lot of questions (...) The length of a coaching session varies not only from coach to coach but also from client to client or problem to problem. There is also less agreement among Solution-Focused practitioners about the optimal number of questions or length of time. The range might go from 20 to 30 minutes, to 2 or 3 hours. Potential clients therefore have to decide how much time they are willing to spend for one session. If the desired time frame is within the above range there is no problem. But if they want to spend less time, for example only five minutes, they might not find a practitioner who offers such *micro coaching*. This does not mean that problems can always be solved within this short amount of time. Yet sometimes less time or fewer questions could be more. There might even be situations where one question is all it needs, or situations where the client does not want to spend more time on the issue at that moment. In a constructivist or a Solution-Focused thinking the client is expert for his world and knows how many questions are enough for her. This argument leads to two simple conclusions: To fit better to the huge variety of clients and problems it makes sense to offer a range from a "one-question-coaching" to a long term coaching setting, and the length of the coaching should be determinable by the coachee.

f) (...) in a certain way. Most Solution-Focused practitioners have their own way of asking questions. They may use common questions e.g. “solution-building questions” (Cauffman and Berg 2002: 4) or have adapted them or invented their own questions that fit their personal style of coaching. You probably won’t find two exactly identical coaching styles. Most coaching models have a defined beginning (e.g. a question like: “What brings you to me?”); they usually start with what Cauffman and Berg call “Socialising” (Cauffman and Berg 2002: 6, Cauffman 2003: 1), and have a defined end (e.g. a question like: “How useful was this coaching session for you on a scale from 1 to 10”). Even the middle part is often structured. There are practitioners who try to fit their questions to their clients and practitioners who ask the same questions in the same order every time. Some coaches try to play with the order of the questions. Cauffman for example mentions that the steps of his eight step dance can be combined “into an idiosyncratic combination that suits the specific situation” Solution-Focused coaches are dealing with (Cauffman 2003: 1). There are thousands of different ways, but every coaching style or model has a certain structure. Could you imagine Solution-Focused work without a structure? Without a certain beginning or an end? These questions lead us to the idea of randomness. I have never seen a coach who randomly asks his questions from the beginning to the end. Why not? Is it not helpful? Is it really, like Cauffman says, an unorganised hopping around (Cauffman 2003: 1)? How do we know that our coaching style is better than total randomness? How can a practitioner say that she works in a Solution-Focused way and believes in constructivism and non-linearity, and at the same time knows what (order) is best for the client? This truly is a contradiction. But if it is impossible to know what order fits best, how do practitioners choose their questions? And why don’t they rely on randomness? I don’t want to propose that everybody should switch to *random coaching,* but randomness in coaching can be viewed as another option that could open a new field of study, and that sometimes could even be more helpful. Consider for example the situation where you as Solution-Focused practitioner are out of good questions and don’t know how to proceed, how do you choose your next question? Why not choose a question randomly and see what happens? The idea of randomness could offer us another option to our normal way of coaching and could at the same time be another way of coaching.

It should have become clear that the above definition is only one way to define coaching. If we stay within this definition we lose a lot of the potential that Solution-Focused work offers us.

Perhaps it makes sense to describe coaching in the following way:

There is a person (e.g. a manager) who does not want to talk to anyone about her issue and who is looking for a solution within the next five minutes. She has only a simple question, but needs some other input. Therefore she visits an internet coaching machine where a computer asks her one randomly chosen Solution-Focused question with the option to stop after the question or to go on and get another one. This goes on until she decides to stop and do something else.

For this person a *random micro Solution-Focused* way of coaching might be the best way to deal with her question. She would never have contacted a coach, because of the relatively low seriousness of the problem, the limited time frame and her decision not to talk to anyone. Therefore this random coaching machine is a better coach for her than "traditional" Solution-Focused coaching.

Random micro Solution-Focused work is an approach that uses Solution-Focused questions in a random and micro way:

The questions are randomly chosen from a set of defined Solution-Focused questions e.g. within a computer database or on a set of cards. This randomness has many advantages: It does not depend on the client, on the problem, on the situation or even on the coach. This independence not only allows it to study the usefulness of one single question ceteris paribus but also fits perfectly with the concepts of constructivism, chaos theory, and systems theory. If we believe in these theories we can never know what question fits best or even better than another question because we don't live in one simple linear world. These theories could even lead to the conclusion that randomness is the best we can do as coaches, or at least as good as any other concept.

The micro aspect refers to the number of questions asked or the length of the coaching. In a constructivist's and systems theoretician's world, every problem, situation, and client is completely different. Therefore Solution-Focused work has to have different forms. The number of questions that are most helpful in a special situation can vary a lot. There might be situations where one question is all that is needed and in other situations two hours of coaching might only be the beginning. In micro Solution-Focused settings only a few questions get asked. This makes sense for all the situations and clients where only a few questions are enough either because of the limited time the client has or because of the positive effects these questions have. If micro coaching is combined with a mechanism where the client can choose after every question if she wants to stop or to go on (e.g. by asking her), it can be very short (one question) or get very long too.

I am not proposing that the random micro Solution-Focused concept is better than other forms, but that this form, like every other form of coaching, fits better to a certain set of problems, circumstances, and clients. Because of the explicit focus on the optimal time frame as well as the fact that random micro coaching does not need a coach (almost everybody can choose a random question) this way of Solution-Focused work perfectly fits into the management setting. Imagine a company where every employee has his own set of random coaching cards which are used to help solve his colleagues' problems, to make meetings worthwhile, or to create decisions that are consistent with the company's strategies. This way Solution-Focused work would not only be beneficial but also be part of the corporate culture.

To explore the full potential, and to be most helpful, Solution-Focused work has to evolve. It should have become clear that the traditional view covers only a small part of the whole possible range. New concepts have to be created. Therefore random micro Solution-Focused work is an attempt to do more of the same and at the same time to do something completely different in order to be most helpful. So get involved and explore the advantages of random micro Solution-Focused work. You will be surprised!

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Improvisation Skills for SF Coaches

Keywords: Improvisation, solutions focus, coach, coaching, spontaneity, flow, facilitating, leading, managing, interaction, responsiveness, new skills, grow, drama, performance, presenting, reflection, dialogue, transformation, paradox, learning

Introduction

Interactions are at the heart of learning. In Solutions Focus we have a saying: "The action is in the interaction". And because each interaction is different, it has to have an element of spontaneity to give it value. This article explores those very practical paradoxical places where you need both structure and freedom; planning and instant response; a general awareness and the agility to work with whatever emerges. In short, we identify the connections between improvisation and skilled solutions focused coaching.

The Improviser's Advantage

To benefit fully from the interactional nature of Solutions Focus, it is vital to develop your skills as an improviser. Whether you are a coach or using SF as a manager, leader or facilitator, you gain a huge advantage when you can comfortably respond in the moment as your workshops, trainings or coaching sessions develop. You get closer to your strategic goals by developing fluency in your tactics. Of course, a solutions focused coach is improvising all the time. If we understand improvisation as the exercise of freedom within a structure, your coaching model (OSKAR, GROW or whatever) provides a structure, and it is within this that you are constantly making choices. As you develop your improvisation skills, you get better at making more appropriate responses. This takes you deep into your

- listening skills
- ability to be present
- responsiveness
- creativity

so that you and your clients get more from every session. In the next section, we see what each of these might mean.

The Skills You Need

From the traditions of drama and performance, we already know that important skills of improvisation include:

- Listening skills – the performer's first duty is to listen to what is happening in the scene, so as to join (or continue) precisely that scene. If they have not been attentive and aware, they are going to upset the audience by appearing to lurch into a different reality. This tends to look either selfish, careless or both.
- Ability to be present – the state of being ready in the here and now; avoiding distractions of past, future and awareness wandering elsewhere.
- Responsiveness – the ability to respond in the moment to the signals around us and to our own relevant processes
- Creativity – the ability to come up with something new and useful at just the moment that it is needed.

How these connect to SF coaching skills

The coach needs all the above skills if they are to progress beyond formulaic coaching. It is fine to have a structure – the advanced coach uses freedom within that structure, and it is improvisational skills that equip the coach to use the structures to best advantage. We can usefully think of this as the coach being a highly-skilled performer in the client-coach conversation.

One of the strongest affinities of improvisation to Solutions Focus is the encouragement to the SF practitioner to say 'Yes'. In dramatic improvisation, saying 'Yes' to a partner's offer during a scene is the most important way to keep that scene going. For a coach, it is part of accepting a client's story. It also reinforces the interactional principle of staying on the surface (rather than questioning the client's offer because you think you have a better idea of what is 'really' going on for them. In improvisation and SF coaching, you work with what you get, not looking to impose pre-thought theories or to search for hidden meanings. Meanings for the client (and perhaps the coach) emerge in the course of the conversation.

An improvisational performer becomes expert at leading and at following, and at knowing when each is appropriate. Likewise, the SF coach is in a 'dance of conversation' with the client.

One minute rants

In an exercise in pairs, each partner in turn tells a story about something that is emotionally charged (and current) . "I can't get people to attend the regularly scheduled meetings," a manager might begin, then elaborate on the frustration and troubles this prompts.

The partner listens and then feeds back to 'the ranter' things that are positive about them that are revealed by the story and the way it is told.

In this particular dance, the unusual feature is to find your rant responded to by an Affirm, instead of the more usual responses, such as agreement ('Oh, yes, that's terrible'), dismissal ('Let's talk about something else'), competition ('You think it's bad for you, you should see what it's like for me…'), or a premature attempt to fix things, ('Here's what you should do..').

The response invites you to reflect on your own strengths, and to continue the conversation resourcefully, rather than, say, argumentatively or defensively. This, we suggest, is more likely to be part of a constructive coaching conversation.

Spontaneously good ideas

In another workshop activity, we asked a group to say spontaneously why they thought improvisation might offer some illuminating parallels for an executive coach. Among their suggestions were:

1. If you don't look good (executive) we (improviser) don't look good. The success of the coach is inextricably linked to the success of the client. When the client looks good, the coach looks good. An improviser is tasked in a scene with making the other peformers look good. In practice, this consists of accepting their suggestions, and supprting them by adding detail, and playing along with their newly-created 'realities'.
2. Playful and different perspective. An improviser, like a good coach, brings a playful quality into the work. There is a sense of possibility, of flexibility, an optimism that things might be different and can work out well.
3. Unattached to outcome "what happens, happens". At the same time as optimism, there is also a realization that we do not control the future. We work with what emerges, aiming to nudge it in useful directions.
4. Willingness to go into the unknown. The improviser, like the coach, can expect the unexpected, and is willing to work with whatever arises.
5. Relationship focus – Listening. The focus is on the relationship in both disciplines – by listening, we are operating in the 'Inbetween'.
6. Turn taking, dialogue and silence. We are comfortable with silence, with the idea of taking turns, and sometimes waiting for the partner to take their turn. If they need time to think, that's fine – these may be the most valuable moments of the entire process.

Paying Attention

Many of the ideas mentioned above are related to a centrally important concept for any conversation or performance – namely that of Attention. We always have choices about where we place our attention. And what we attend to will make a difference to what then happens. This is one of the revelations of a constructivist view of interactions. (Miller 1997).

Notions of attention can be found in many fields that are of interest to coaches, including, for example, Inner Game and Alexander Technique:

"Attending to movements without consciously trying to control them is a primary goal of Inner Game learning and is much easier to practice with actions that don't challenge your competence." (The Inner Game of Golf, Timothy Gallway 1982)

Similarly, in Alexander Technique, you work towards an improved conscious control of movement. And a vital first step in this is to let go – just as one must during an improvisation or a coaching conversation. You particularly let go of the idea that you are in control. There are more things out of your control than in your control – and this becomes increasingly apparent as we learn more about the systemic nature of organisations, for example.

We might also recognize that the notion of less control, (ego, self) may not be to everyone's taste. Does it not mean accepting a reduction in our perceptions of how powerful we feel? Well, maybe, but on the rewarding side, it can free you to engage with greater exhilaration, more rewards for being alive and for applying our intelligence in the moment as it unfolds.

For the client in coaching, attention is also critical. Clients will sustain attention best when they desire the goals they are working towards. Sustained interest requires harmony with our values. Or we end up with Marcusian alienation or – put more simply - getting distracted.

We each generally have a choice about where to focus our attention, within our overall cloud of awareness. Keeping your attention is 'concentration', which contrasts with wandering – (an immediate alternative) or the eventual alternative outcome of getting bored.

Learning to concentrate

This kind of concentration is a skill, which can be learned and can be practised. We can learn what to attend to in order to achieve the best results – within any given activity. Concentration is not about trying, it is about following our line of interest. You allow it, don't force it.

To do so, you attend to the Here and Now. This involves

– avoiding perfectionism, with its shoulds, oughts, musts
– avoiding tension, with its did's
– avoiding worries – futures, outcomes, how it will turn out

If you want to increase your interest in what you are attending to (your client's needs and strengths, for example)

- treat everything you notice as a useful gift
- look for details, subtleties, nuance.

Usefulness of drama

Drama famously requires a willing suspension of disbelief. Willing means that the audience and the performers are complicitly going along with it. It is usually a tacit agreement, reinforced by contextual prompts, but the agreement must be there.

Disbelief is suspended – the arrangement is temporary, ending with the conclusion of the performance or if a rule is violated along the way. And along the way, we believe – we act *as if* this were the case, which has tremendous benefits for exploring a case, trying out behaviours, rehearsing potential realities.

Any metaphor has this much drama about it. While the metaphor holds, there is a willing suspension of disbelief. Therefore explore within the metaphor as far as it will take you.

As a coach, you suspend your disbelief regarding your client's abilities. For the duration of the conversation, they are capable, resourceful, motivated individuals. What's more, they have their solutions within them. To act in this way is the professional duty of the coach. Afterwards, you may think what you will. For the moment, you are an actor.

Paradox

It may seem paradoxical to speak of techniques for spontaneity.

Yet through application of techniques we may reach a point at which pure spontaneity takes over. Perhaps that happened at times during the experience of the improvisation, when everything simply flowed. And the same can occur when coaching, facilitating, leading or presenting – you know what to do, you do it effortlessly and it fits the context perfectly. In short, it works.

Why do we need spontaneity?

- For ourselves as coaches or leaders, it enables us to handle whatever comes up, riding over the bumps inevitable in any interactional situation.
- It sharpens our receptivity - so we can learn new skills and be open to new experience.
- It widens our range, so that we can continue to grow.

Improvisation is a way of opening the door to take in more of our experience and an alternative to blocking out the many signals which are available to us.

We find improvisation in many traditions, from jazz music, clowning and story-telling to Indian 'ragas' - lengthy songs which begin with musicians tuning their instruments to the vibrations of the room they are in and the audience they are with.

One vital and common element in each is the delight which comes from making things up.

Another crucial element is the importance of doing it on the spot - here and now - with each performance fresh for and responsive to the situation. This chimes with our SF tenet of Every Case Is Different.

When the richness of each experience of improvisational activity is followed by reflection and dialogue, and completed by the discipline of real plans to apply the learning, your learning will be truly transformational. That is, you will do different things and do things differently – with all the interactional spin-offs which that implies.

Improvisational activities draw together the most fundamental skills required of people working in our modern world. Immediate benefits you might notice as a coach or SF practitioner include insights, laughter and relaxation – for you and those you are working with.

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A Coaching Programme for Professional Reorientation

Keywords: professional reorientation, creation of new professional options, self-confidence and values, competency profiles, creating networks, improvisation

Summary

In 2005 Lufthansa Cargo redefined its strategy and operative approach of dealing successfully with a very competitive market situation: customers demand high quality at best prices and competition is tough in the face of overcapacity. From a strategic point of view this means the necessity to clearly focus on the core business of flying cargo from one airport to another.

Leading the company towards improved results with fewer human resources was the challenge presented to Lufthansa Cargo. Therefore, the number of employees in headquarters functions in Frankfurt, most of them long-term, was significantly reduced by more than 30%.

The reduction of staffing levels at Lufthansa Cargo created a situation in which a large number of employees lost their jobs. In support of the necessary process of professional reorientation, the company sought new ways of investing in people.

Lufthansa Cargo took responsibility for this employee group and offered a professional programme to those no longer employed in the new business processes. “CreateFuture” is a coaching programme available to all employees and managers who lost their jobs during the company’s restructuring process.

The programme is solution-based: it builds on the strengths, expertise and potential of every individual deciding to participate.

The results of the programme after 9 months are good, with most of the participants having found a new job.

"CreateFuture" – the programme

CreateFuture was introduced in May 2005 to offer professional expertise and individual coaching to those employees and managers of Lufthansa Cargo in Germany who lost their jobs during the company's restructuring process.

It is the first time within Lufthansa Cargo that the number of employees working in business administrative jobs has been reduced significantly: in excess of 30% of those working in strategy, marketing, controlling and information technology lost their jobs. In some of these areas the resources were cut by 50%; some strategic projects were discontinued entirely.

Those employees no longer a part of the new business processes within Lufthansa Cargo have been assigned to temporary jobs until the end of 2006.

During this period all those who have lost their job must seek alternatives within Lufthansa on a corporate level or look beyond Lufthansa.

The group of employees losing their jobs represents a highly-qualified group with airline expertise in very specific areas. More than 60% are team leaders or project managers; more than 20% are older than 50 years. Over 40% have worked for Lufthansa for more than 15 years.

The situation is a personal catastrophe for most: many of the long-term employed expect that they may no longer be needed. At the beginning quite a lot of employees dealt with the situation on their own, not wishing to admit that they are part of the unemployed group. Others, especially the younger ones, formed teams and jointly discussed how to deal with the situation of unemployment.

Feelings of disappointment, anger towards the company and uncertainty as to what the future holds predominate.

Those who have lost their jobs have a broad variety of questions:

- Was it the right decision to cut so many jobs?
- Why me – my record has always been good?
- How do I find a new position; my qualifications are very specific?

Definition and development of the programme

The following steps were important in programme design and implementation which was managed jointly with HR Management:

a. Analyse experience and lessons learned in other companies.
b. Evaluate potential partners as specialists for personnel development.
c. Design a programme that is appropriate to the specific situation and requirements.
d. Communicate, start and manage the programme.

a. Analyse experience

Several companies offering job development programmes such as German banks, a pharmaceutical company and an automotive company were interviewed.

The following lessons learned from the analysis of the interviews were important for the creation of the Lufthansa Cargo programme:

1. Clear and open communication on values, features and conditions of the programme
2. Voluntary participation
3. Complete confidentiality
4. Anonymous decision on external job development
5. Continuity of cooperation until participants find a new job.

b. Evaluate Potential Partners as Specialists for Personnel Development

6 potential partners were examined within the project. The main criteria for the final decision were as follows:

1. Expertise – evaluated by the proposals, profiles and references
2. Scope of the offer – consultation, workshops, internet tools and data bases
3. Access to job markets – type and number of job opportunities offered
4. Creativity – openness to design a customized approach
5. Willingness to cooperate – openness for a joint concept
6. Price – appropriate pricing in relation to services offered

The evaluation is performed jointly and leads to a clear choice of a partner.

c. Design an appropriate programme

"CreateFuture" is the Lufthansa Cargo coaching programme that offers to the participants a place, time and professional expertise to manage the process of finding a new job. CreateFuture has 2 objectives: to encourage and build up self-confidence and to deliver professional expertise on how to find a job successfully in the present difficult economic situation.

The key success factors are managed as follows:

1. Communication is clear and open – it starts personally and is then maintained by workshops and in the intranet.
2. Participation in the programme is voluntary.
3. Confidentiality - there is no information to and control by the line managers or HR.
4. Participation in external job development is anonymous.
5. Continuity is offered at a special place and by a team of experts – the "Future-Lab".

The solution-focused approach is key to success of the programme: to gain trust in own capabilities again and to act accordingly based on own values and interests. The main idea is that of self-discovery and the disclosure of opportunities.

Self-discovery - is a coaching process to recognize the own potential, expertise and experience. The disclosure of opportunities is a professional development of a network of people, within and outside the company and includes the analysis and development of alternatives.

Main tools within this process are one-to-one coaching and team coaching.

The role of the external partner is an important one within this process – expertise and experience in managing the process of professional reorientation is essential.

d. Communicate and implement the programme

The participants receive a personal letter by the board that invites to take part in the programme. An invitation to a 2-hour team session with an external coach is attached.

These 2 hours are used as opportunity to talk about the personal situation of the team members. The coach moderates a session where the participants exchange their views and feelings and start to work on defining explicitly their own values and interests.

Main tool within the communication that follows is an initial two-day-workshop: the concept, methods, tools and coaches are presented. Many participants meet other people for the first time who are in the same situation – and often intense networking starts immediately.

Based on the contents of these workshops everyone can decide whether he or she wants to be part of the coaching programme. The coaches already working in the workshop suggest dates for a first 2-hour session of individual coaching.

The coachee is free to choose an internal or external coach and to decide on the start of the programme. If a positive decision is made - up to 50% of the working time is then exclusively made available for working on building a new professional position and career.

Individual coaching

Coaching sessions with the external partner are offered and recommended to every participant within CreateFuture. For many participants in the programme it is essential to talk to an expert who is not part of the company. These coaches are neutral just by being part of an external professional consultancy.

The internal coaches are part of the process from the beginning – the participant is free to choose whom he prefers as coach. The internal coaches within Lufthansa Cargo are all experienced and educated systemic coaches who have been working in training, personnel development or change management for many years. About 20% of the participants choose internal coaches from the outset.

After the first 5 individual coaching sessions with the external coaches –there is a review session with the programme manager. The coachee can choose how to proceed: internal coaches are available or there is the possibility to just be part of the networking opportunities and make use of the support from "FutureLab" experts.

How to build up self-confidence and communication skills within coaching

Main difficulties of the process are

- to overcome negative feelings and turn to a positive look on one's own life;
- to start the process of self-reflection and identify values and interests;
- to become aware of an individual profile - "using a strength is not the same as being aware of it";
- to communicate succinctly so that an outsider is quickly given an idea of "who you are".

To offer space for positive feelings is an important part of the "let it go" intention. Improvisation (Jackson, P. 2003) within the team and individual coaching proves to be very useful: – just laughing; – creating a story jointly or a bit of positive "ayurveda" .

Identifying own capabilities and potentials is the main tool to achieve both objectives of the programme: trust and self-confidence grow as the application process starts to be more successful.

Imagine a situation of someone 48 years old, with 2 children and a mortgage and working as an IT-specialist responsible for specific flight plan programmes. The coachee has been with Lufthansa Cargo for more than 20 years and has a very good track record.

The first normal human reaction is frustration and anger about the managers who, from his point of view, have got the company into this situation: "they've still got their jobs but I lost mine, even though I always did a good job." So there is trust in oneself of a sort, mixed with negative feelings about the situation. At the same time, however, there is doubt as to whether "anybody will need me – with my specific qualifications?"

During the first individual coaching session it is important to have the time and opportunity to talk openly about the individual situation. The first question that is useful in moving forward is the one that asks for personal objectives with respect to the coaching process: What does the coachee expect to happen during these 2 hours?

The question helps to turn the focus of the attention from the situation, the company, the management to the individual: “what do I personally want to achieve?” The emphasis of this question is on the “I” – it clearly signifies the step from being reactive to proactive.

How to build a personal profile

A very important part of the coaching process is the identification of the specific competencies that can be used when looking for a new job.

The group of coaches, many of whom have a high level of expertise in recruiting and developing people, use their experience to determine key success factors in convincing decision-makers of aptitude for a specific job.

The coaching team is unanimous that it is authenticity that is the key competence when applying for a job. The best approach is to be genuine in aspirations and skills.

Coaching with a view to finding a new job is therefore designed at getting a clear picture. Once this is place, it will not be difficult to communicate it.

Some solution-focused questions prove to be valuable in the analysis of the interests and the competency profiles from the outset.

1. What was your best business experience in recent years?
2. How did you achieve this?
3. Which skills did you use?

Question number one “what was your best business experience “ turns the focus from the present situation to the past. This is done only with the intention to create a realistic and positive view for the future.

The detailed analysis of past achievements changes the view of the coachee – he looks at himself with the eyes of an outsider – and starts to discover important strengths and capabilities.

The question “how did you achieve this?” turns the focus to the coachee’s contribution to business and private successes and leads to a very specific, positive picture.

The conclusion with the third question “which skills did you use?” helps to create a competency profile that is at once realistic and convincing.

The next question is a very famous and a very important one: “What else?” It leads to a second or third consideration of good business practice: the thorough mutual analysis creates an individual and very specific portfolio of the coachee’s competences. The basis for a convincing communication has been established.

Team coaching

From the very beginning 3 types of team events are offered by the FutureLab:

1. Workshops that deepen the expertise in professional marketing techniques including video training.
2. Workshops that present different market segments that may be of interest as potential targets for new employment.
3. Team workshops that focus on
   - building a network
   - getting a different perspective of one another
   - exchanging experience

The following picture was chosen by a group of participants as symbol for their feelings within the team:

Supervision

The team of internal coaches meets regularly for intervision and uses the methodology published by the "Weiterbildungsforum" in Basel (Peter Szabo, 2003).

The experience of using the appreciative way of building on the individual strengths of the coach has proven to be very useful as the creativity and the energy of the team is used to strengthen the existing coaching skills and to complement them by fitting ideas of the team.

An external supervisor is used at important points within the process when an experienced counterpart is felt to be useful.

The collaboration with the external coaches is provided by an informal, intense exchange using the feedback from the participants that is analysed systematically.

Situation after 9 months

After 9 months in the programme most of the participants have found a new job. For the others the situation is once again difficult, possibly even more so than before. The predominant feeling is that "I have done everything I can and still I receive only rejections".

The main idea then put forward by the coach team is a new start for both: coach and coachee. The suggestion made is to choose a new coach and find other different ways of looking for jobs in the new coaching relationship.

Or, if the coachee wishes to kept his present coach: start the process again. Analyse the experience made: discard what doesn't work and do more of those things that proved successful.

Networking is intensified at the same time: "working breakfasts" and "networking events" are offered to intensify the relationship within the group between those who have already found a job and those who are still looking.

Creating a positive and good atmosphere is key for these workshops which is why there is a wide use of improvisation elements (Jackson, P. 2003).

Internal and external quality control

Regular quality checks by feedback forms and interviews of the participants lead to continuous further development of the programme.

The participants are interviewed anonymously in March 2006 by an external to the programme to evaluate their judgement: all of them say they would participate again.

Important for all participants is the positive attitude of the programme – they are taken seriously as a person and an atmosphere of positive spirit is created.

The greatest values of the programme from the participants' point of view are the opportunity for self-reflection, the individual coaching and the networking opportunities.

As far as self-reflection is concerned many say that their persistence and discipline were strengthened, something they considered to be very valuable.

Most important area for improvement is starting the programme sooner.

The results of the programme are convincing:

- Self-confidence is built up.
- The participants act responsibly for their own future.
- More than 80% found a new perspective within 6 months.

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Craig Sked and Janine Waldman

Working in Partnership to Introduce Solutions Focus Coaching as a Management Tool: A Case Study

Keywords: SF Coaching, SF Tools, Emergent nature of organisations

Summary

The following case study examines how The Solution Focus (TSF) worked with the London Borough of Merton (LBM) to introduce Solution Focus coaching as a management tool within the organisation. The case study provides an insight into how the adoption of a Solutions Focus approach, namely using what works, taking small steps and adopting a collaborative consulting approach, enabled the organisation to navigate through a journey of change by identifying emergent opportunities.

Introduction

The pervasive effects of globalisation, and the subsequent scramble by organisations to invest in the development of expertise, have seen the concepts of systems thinking, complexity science and knowledge productivity rise to the fore in management and organisational literature. These concepts mark a fundamental shift in thinking away from the traditional linear and relatively predictable view of organisations, towards an increasingly complex and unpredictable environment which is best described as emergent and sees organisations having to constantly adapt to rapidly changing markets. Inherent in this adaptation process is the need for a collaborative approach towards knowledge creation and the transfer and exchange of learning within organisations. (Beeby and Booth 2000; Collins, Dunne, and O' Keefe 2002; Gosh 2004)

The following case study places the learning and collaboration process under the spot light by examining how The Solution Focus (TSF) worked with the London Borough of Merton (LBM) to introduce Solution Focus coaching as a management tool within the organisation. The case study also provides an insight into how the adoption of a Solutions Focus approach, namely using what works, taking small steps and adopting a collaborative consulting approach, enabled the organisation to navigate through a journey of change by identifying emergent opportunities.

Company Background, Environment of Change

LBM is a local authority responsible for delivering a wide range of services across South West London and employs approximately 5500 people. Various government agendas, such as “Best Value”, “Social Inclusion” and “Life Long Learning”, together with strict target setting to monitor service levels, places local government in a period of unprecedented change. Increasingly, there is an expectation to collaborate and integrate services with other government and independent agencies, whilst simultaneously providing high quality services within a stringent financial framework.

LBM has traditionally seen a lack of investment and prioritisation of people management and development. However over the last few years there has been a raft of initiatives designed to improve performance management and leadership capability. These initiatives have seen a major shift in managerial approach with the decentralisation of decision making to team managers and a general expectation that managers accept responsibility for team performance and service delivery.

What Happened?

What was attractive about Solution Focus?

The initial client need was primarily focused around a performance management intervention that aimed to equip managers with coaching skills in order to improve individual employee performance. The decision to adopt the Solution Focus methodology was based largely on the simplicity of the OSKAR model (Jackson & McKergow 2002) and the associated tools which could be applied in a variety of day to day management situations (this was confirmed in our feedback from delegates) and the applicability to other areas such as team development, problem-solving, organisational change and strategy formulation. *See Appendix 1 for the OSKAR Model*

What Did The Solutions Focus Provide?

Working with the clients' request for a focus on performance management, The Solutions Focus adapted the OSKAR model, placing a strong emphasis on goal setting (platform and future perfect) and action (small steps). One activity that was particularly effective for platform building when working with people who want to talk about problems was the Fraying Rope Rescue exercise. *See Appendix 2 for the Fraying Rope Rescue Exercise*

Given that the target audience were managers, and therefore had a vested interest in the performance of their people, and would have input into their action plans, there was also a focus on working collaboratively and sharing know how through story telling.

In addition to working with the OSKAR model, TSF explicitly introduced Solutions Focus as the methodology behind the model, enabling participants to appreciate and explore the wider applications of the approach. This was very useful when looking at the transfer of knowledge from the training room to the work place, with participants being able to see applications for their coaching skills and also for the much broader application of Solutions Focus tools and principles. The implicit/explicit grid process was used to assist with the transfer of learning into the workplace. *See Appendix 3 for the Implicit/Explicit process..*

One challenge facing the introduction of coaching into the organisation was that the senior management team tended to view management theory and models with scepticism and, as Chapman (2003) points out, securing commitment for HRD initiatives is notoriously difficult, especially when they relate to the development of soft skills. In order to achieve support and commitment, a one day programme, specifically designed for the senior management team, was conducted. It must be noted that this workshop was designed and delivered approximately six months after the initial manager's workshops and stories of success were used to gain buy-in to attend the workshop.

The approach to the workshop involved using Solutions Focus tools and processes to assist the team in developing a coaching strategy for the organisation. This highly experiential approach significantly enhanced the buy-in of the management team, in that through a practical demonstration of the application of the Solutions Focus approach, the team were able to understand the approach, whilst simultaneously witnessing its effectiveness in that it produced a tangible outcome, namely the organisational coaching strategy.

Success in Unpredictable Areas

Somewhat surprisingly, the initial success of the coaching programme was within the Support and Customer Services Department, who originally were not even targeted to attend the course. This team, which was facing some challenges meeting targets, had heard a rumour about a coaching workshop that incorporated an interesting new approach, and enrolled most of the management team on the programme. The team liked the OSKAR model and saw real value to them in the application of Solutions Focus principles and tools to help them with their current issues. They applied the approach immediately at a team meeting the next day and continued to do so over the following weeks and months. When asked to comment on the impact of the workshop, Julie Evans: Head of Community Support and Customer services said:

"The course equipped the management team to adopt a positive stance in challenging poor performance, focusing on solutions and not problems - the results speak for themselves, across all areas of operation our performance has improved substantially"

The fact that wide scale success occurred in an unpredictable area prompted significant reflection and ultimately resulted in two main learning points. Firstly, it caused the client to question the espoused top-down approach to implementing management tools within an organisation. Whilst support and advocacy from senior management certainly helps, hence addition of the one-day senior management programme, this case study proves that by taking small steps and doing what works is a powerful and effective approach to implementing change. In the case of the Support and Customer Services Department, the power of rumour, combined with a commitment and appetite for change, proved to be key ingredients for success. The second learning point is the fact that a large proportion of the department attended the workshop proved successful in maintaining momentum for change and highlights the value of a shared language, or, as Senge (1990) argues, a shared mental model for dealing with organisational issues.

Another area where there was a large uptake of participants was with social workers, who had come across Solutions Focus in a therapy context. Initially sceptical about using an approach previously used with their clients, after experiencing various practical demonstrations within a safe learning environment, they recognised that they could re-organise their knowledge and use Solutions Focus as an effective management approach. For example, one social worker took her team through the OSKAR model when a number of disagreements arose during a team meeting on client care, resulting in consensus on how to move forward with the issues raised.

Other success stories include the participant who re-designed his areas induction process in the workshop and was convinced that by taking a Solutions Focused approach to induction he could get his new starters up to speed much faster. Another manager identified how she could incorporate Solutions Focus tools and principles into her staffing strategy in times of staff shortages, by adapting the work to fit the skills of her team and using a solutions approach to discussions about rota changes. Then there was the manager who came to the workshop asking how to deal with one of her direct reports who she was having great difficulty working with. By the end of the workshop equipped with Solutions Focus tools and techniques, and having been coached about the issue, she was looking forward to her next conversation with this person.

What worked well?

Emergent Future Perfect & Consultant and Client worked in a Solutions Focus Way

A fundamental reason for the successful implementation of Solutions Focus Coaching can be attributed to the way in which the consultant and client worked together. Using Solution Focus principles such as asking what the client wanted, using small steps and finding out what worked and doing more of it, proved successful in assisting the client to navigate through the unchartered territory of implementing coaching into the complex and highly unstructured organisation.

By adopting a respectful and collaborative consulting approach, another hallmark of Solution Focus, TSF developed an open an honest relationship with the client which enabled the client to tap into the consultant's learning about the organisation. As a result of this learning, the programme altered over time and the client began to recognise the potential value in developing an internal coaching capacity in order to amplify the positive effects of Solutions Focused coaching throughout the organisation.

Thus upon reflection, it is evident that the clients future perfect evolved over time as the initial, and somewhat narrow, approach of using coaching as an individual performance management tool evolved towards a more strategic agenda of building and developing coaching capability within the organisation. This is also highlighted by the client recognising the value of the Solutions Focused approach as a useful management tool, seen by the re-naming of the programme after eighteen months from 'Coaching for Results' to 'Solutions Focused Coaching for Managers'

This reflection not only highlights the emergent nature of organisations, but also emphasises the empowering nature of the Solutions Focus approach, and as Visser and Bodien (n/d) highlight, Solutions Focus is non-judgmental and based on not knowing what is best for an organisation. In this case study, it was the client who realised the wider opportunities and began to take small steps to realising these opportunities.

Figure 1.1 represents a graphical depiction of the emerging future perfect for LBM. Please note the Solutions Focus Model (Jackson and McKergow 2002) has been adapted for this case study.

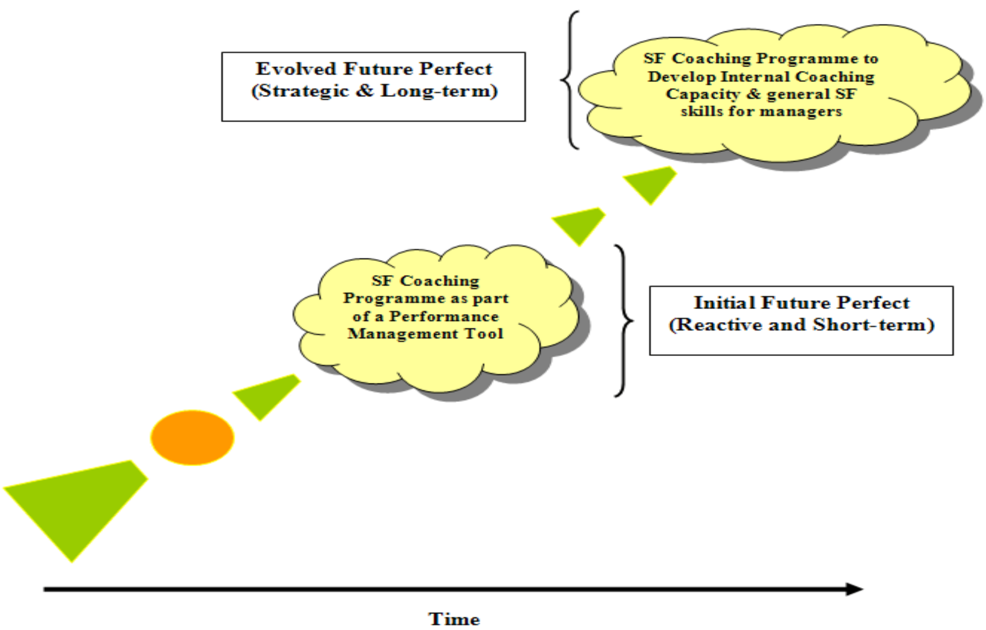

Fig. 1.1 LBM Future Perfect Evolved Over Time

Conclusion

The above case study highlights the unpredictable and emergent nature of organisations and emphasises the empowering nature of the Solutions Focus approach. The adoption of a Solutions Focused consulting approach, led to a highly collaborative client/consultant relationship which enabled the successful implementation of Solution-Focused Coaching into the organisation. Success of the programme occurred in unpredictable areas but proved effective in enabling the organisation to recognise the value of the Solutions Focused approach as a management tool, as well as recognising the long term potential benefits of developing a coaching capability within the organisation.

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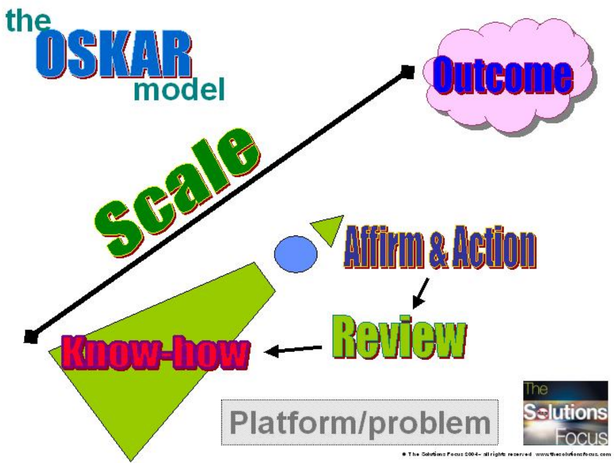
APPENDICES

Appendix 1	OSKAR Model
Appendix 2	Fraying Rope Rescue
Appendix 3	Introducing Solutions Focus as a Management Tool: The implicit/explicit process

Appendix 1

OSKAR Model

- *Outcomes* - jointly define coaching outcome
- *Scale* - On a scale from 0 - 10
- *Know-How* - relevant know-how, resources, skills, attributes
- *Affirm* - compliment skills and resources
- *Action* - Note the know-how, decide next small steps



Source: Jackson, P & McKergow, M

Appendix 2

Fraying Rope Rescue
An exercise in affirming and finding possibilities in even the most unpromising circumstances.

- Split into pairs.
- The client complains about someone/something for a couple of minutes.
- The coach compliments the client, justifying the compliment in terms of the complaints made.
- Compliments should appear pertinent to the client and be sincerely offered by the coach.

I.E. this is not allowed…..

Client: ‘’ the state of seating on Virgin trains is awful, particularly for older people who rely on them to get about when they can no longer drive, but whenever you can find someone to complain to they do not care, moan, moan, moan etc’’ Coach: ‘’ nice weather we are having, did you see the game last night?’’

I.E. this is allowed …….

Client: ‘’ the state of seating on Virgin trains is awful, particularly for older people who rely on them to get about when they can no longer drive, but whenever you can find someone to complain to they do not care, moan, moan, moan etc’’ Coach: ‘’ you are a considerate person as the comfort of other people is clearly important for you’’

Coaches: watch for non verbal, observable signs of acceptance

Clients: please feed back to the coach if the compliment felt like a compliment

Source: Unknown

Appendix 3

Introducing Solutions Focus as a Management Tool:
The implicit/explicit process

One of the challenges of working with mixed groups on two day workshops is ensuring the transfer of ideas and concepts into practical steps that people can take after the workshop. Steps that directly fit with their goals and outcomes for attending the course

Also, whilst this is a coaching course, we are looking for ways for participants to see that they not only have a useful coaching model, but also a set of tools and an approach that can be used in may situations.

Having worked with a number of groups at the council, the following process has been found to be very useful in helping participants go away feeling equipped to take action, and to appreciate the many ways solutions focus tools and approached can be used in the workplace.

Process

On day one of the workshop, whilst checking in with participants on what would make the workshop worth while for them, also ask what key questions they want answered.

E.g. How to deal with a difficult person?
How to get that extra 25% performance out of my people?
How to be assertive in the coaching process?
How to be specific with goals and actions?

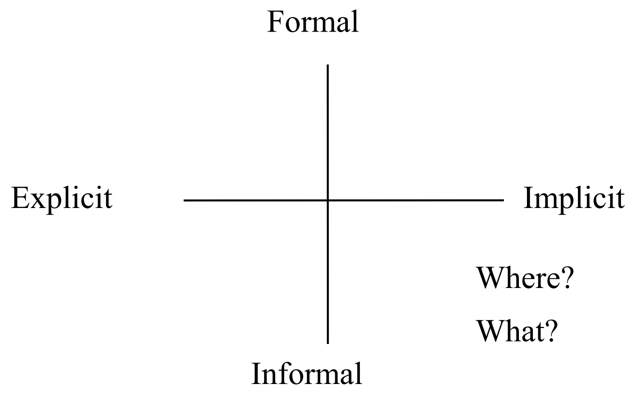
These questions are displayed on a flip chart and put on the wall. Participants are requested keep these questions in mind during the workshop and to note anything covered that they think is useful in relation to this.

The questions are frequently referred to over the course of the day.

On day two, after we have covered most of the content of the programme

1) Tell participants that we are now going to look specifically at how they can apply all the tools and techniques we have practiced so far.
2) Invite them to form pairs and tell them that they have 2 minutes to come up with as many SF tools as they can, explaining that future perfect is a tool
3) Ask participants to call out the tools and write all offers on the flip chart, these may include: scaling, SIMPLE, counters, small steps, affirming, platform…the more the better

4) Introduce participants to the implicit/explicit grid, have it either on a slide or pre-prepared flip chart.



5) Explain the grid,
   - Explicit is when we use coaching and solutions focus and tell people that we are doing it….”here’s a technique I’ve come across how about we try it our?”
   - Implicit: using the tools and techniques without specifically labelling them
   - Formal: A formal meeting e.g.: performance appraisal, supervision, team meeting
   - Informal: A chance meeting at the photo copier
6) Give examples for each quadrant
7) Give participants 4 minutes to work on their own to come up with as many applications they can think of for the tools captured on the flip chart. Explain that they are looking for where they might use coaching/tools, what tool they may use and how they would use it. For example: In an appraisal, use scaling to assess how well somebody has been doing in relation to a specific project.
8) Also tell participants that whilst they are doing this they are also to refer to the questions they personally posed at the beginning of day one and include the answers they have to these questions so far on the grid.
9) After the four minutes get participants into groups of 3-6 and give them a further 9-12 minutes to capture as many applications collectively as they can on a pre prepared flip chart with the grid on.
10) Debrief all flip charts, sharing ideas and know-how. Specifically checking in with the individual participants regarding their questions, working with them and the group to ensure that they now have ideas and steps they can take to use on the questions they posed earlier in the workshop.
11) It may be useful here to ask a question along the lines of “Suppose….you went away and did some of these things in the way you have just described, what might be some of the positive consequences of this?” “What would be the first signs that this was the case?”
12) Finish off with a round of applause for the resourcefulness and creativity of the groups.

The result is usually an extensive collection of ideas and applications’ ranging from how SF and coaching can be used in situations from 1:1’s to team meeting, inductions etc.

The outcome of this is that people go away with their own strategies to deal with the issues they brought to the workshop. They also get the opportunity to see that they not only have a coaching model, they also have an extensive and adaptable tool kit that they can use in may situations

Source: Janine Waldman & Paul Z Jackson 2005

Stephanie v. Bidder Szabó, Kati Hankovszky, Urs Limacher-Koechlin, Felix Hirschburger

Reflecting as a new solution-focused service for clients?

Keywords: reflecting team, appreciation

Summary

We see reflecting as a delightful and effective approach to work with clients. Based on a solution-focused attitude, a small team reflects a certain issue a client comes up with during half an hour. Within this short time frame an appreciative and creative atmosphere emerges, allowing a solution-focused free flow of thoughts and ideas which could be helpful for the client.

This article shows what is meant by "reflecting" and tells the development of this approach in a short history. Then you get a deeper insight into how we actually conduct our reflecting sessions, and what we learned out of our experiences so far.

Our team is currently at work building up a competence center for reflecting in Switzerland.

What we (currently) mean by "reflecting"

Reflecting is a specific conversation between two or more people who were listening to a coaching or therapy session either in the same room or behind a one-way-mirror. This conversation between the reflectors elaborates what impressed them (?) about the issue and about the person who told it. Furthermore, it gathers appreciating ideas, pictures and associations which crossed the minds of the reflectors while listening. The reflectors talk in third person about the client and about what they have observed. The client sits back and just listens to the conversation. Contributions can be made complementarily or detached from what has been said before, that may go in the same or in a completely different direction.

"Reflecting" for us also means a new service to clients

– while the client describes an issue in a conference call, as a basis for a reflecting conversation or
– within a longer process of learning or counselling by being present at the client's event. At one specific moment the process is interrupted and the reflecting takes place as a separate indirect conversation.

Reflecting - a short history

A) Reflecting team

In the beginning, reflecting teams helped the interviewing therapist by observing the process behind a one-way mirror and in a break (or more breaks) by telling the therapists their opinion on the case and on possible next steps. This took place in a separate room, while the clients remained in the therapy room.

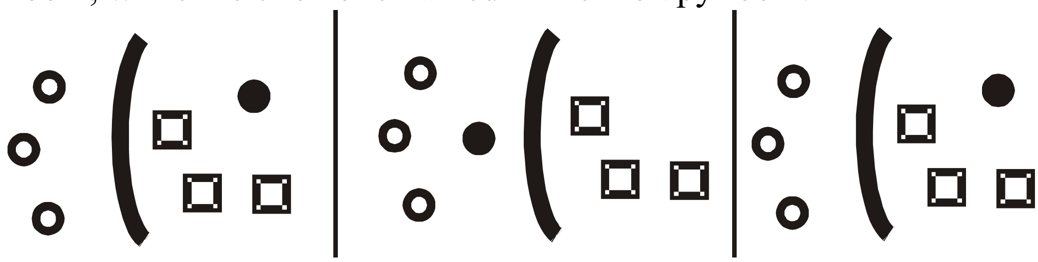


Figure 2: Reflecting team as consultants for the interviewing therapist

B) The intervention of the reflecting team

This form was developed in Norway by the team of Tom Andersen. The professional setting in systemic family therapy intended to create a movement in a stuck process. Professionals standing behind the mirror observed aspects which their colleague who worked with the family wasn't able to keep all in mind. They explored a possibility to make a direct impact while still standing in an outside position. The growing of this idea of intervening was a long evolution process starting from the light presentiment till one day they really couldn't do anything but make the intervention we now call the reflecting team (Andersen 1996: 27f –since the English version is out of print, we use the German version). In every session they took a break where the direction of the one-way-mirror was changed and the clients together with the interviewing therapist listened to the conversation of the reflecting team. Doing this they developed a new understanding and hypothesis on the case the clients were talking about.

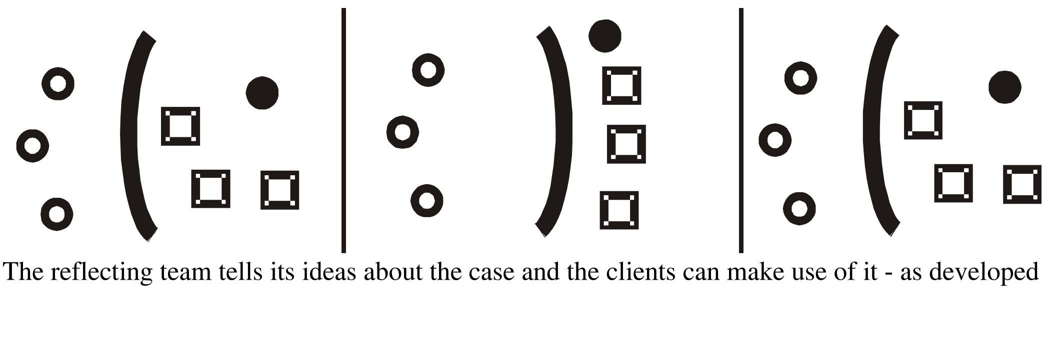


Figure 3: The reflecting team tells its ideas about the case and the clients can make use of it - as developed in Norway

C) The Solution-Focused reflecting team

The Bristol Solution Group (Norman et al 2004: 67) developed the solution-focused application of the reflecting team-idea:

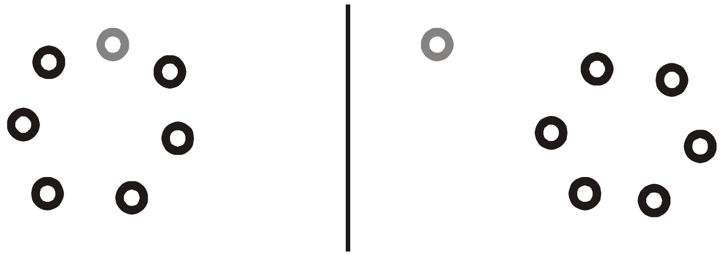


Figure 4: Phases of intervision including direct and indirect communication with the customer : presenting, clarifying / affirming, reflecting / closing

The idea of using the potential of non-involved experts is implemented in groups of colleagues or independent professionals. All group members can be clients and the others deliver their thoughts as a "collegial" supervision (= intervision). Harry Norman and colleagues worked out a structure which rules the order of speech and the duration (all together 30 min).

D) Reflecting teams in learning settings by Weiterbildungsforum Basel

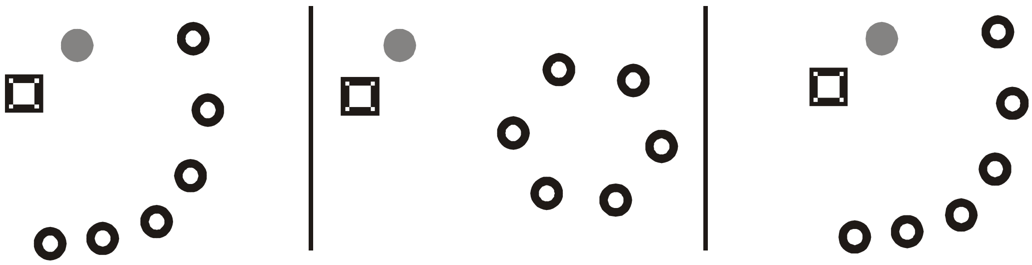


Figure 5: The whole learning group listens while one learner-coach interviews the customer

There are two specific aspects of the reflecting team's intervention (see B) in these coaching-seminars. One is the fact that all the reflectors (up to 15) are sitting in the same room during the coaching session; we believe that the attentive listening of these people has an impact on the process. The second point is that the reflecting team generates compliments for the client by telling what impressed them, and what they think are first signposts leading towards the goal.

How we do "reflecting" (as reflecting.ch team)

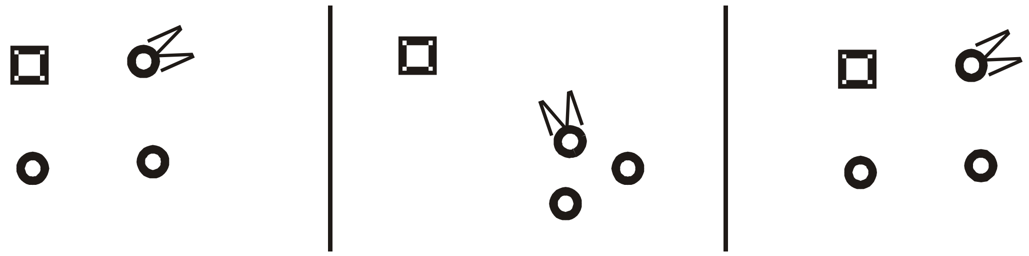


Figure 6:

The "Master of Ceremonies" is responsible for the client's comfort and the communication of the process. Whereas the whole team creates in a short time period an appreciative and reflecting atmosphere, allowing the free flow of thoughts and ideas which could be helpful for the client.

a) Reflecting as an alternative to coaching

Reflecting in our setting is a service to customers. We developed the format on the grounds of Harry Norman's Solution-Focused Reflecting Team and the "kollegiales Coaching" by Peter Szabó.

In our boldest dreams we understand it as a solution-focused alternative to coaching where the customer contacts a reflecting team to get new insights in a very short time. Goal-setting and individual clarification is prepared by the customer in advance. Figure 5 shows ways of interaction whereas in the middle phase the customer just listens to the reflectors sharing a mix of affirmation, generated thoughts and pictures.

b) Essential phases

The essential phases in our work are

1) Goal-setting and individual clarification by the client in advance
2) Reflecting session
   - presenting (5 minutes)
   - clarifying (5-10 min.)
   - reflecting by indirect communication and appreciation (10 min.)
   - conclusions and freefloating thoughts
3) follow-up interview after some weeks (done by Resourcefulsearch, 15-30 min.)

c) Our reflecting pilot projects and the reflection on it

Based on our initial curiosity – what would clients perceive as useful? – we developed a solution-focused follow-up interview done by Resourcefulsearch, Felix Hirschburger, which takes place a few weeks after the reflecting. Felix loves to talk with clients about the second metaposition.

We think that these interviews support clients strengthen their achievements they made in the meantime and we get some feedback in client's words which we probably –if the client decides not to say anything at the end of the reflecting call- wouldn't have.

In this paper we will show you the client's point of view from three different angles.

One perspective is from a male client who did not have a long term career plan for the first time in his life. His reflecting goal was to get support and ideas how to get on with this new situation. The follow-up interview happened two weeks after the reflecting session – in the following statements marked with a (c).

The second perspective is from a female client who reported motivational problems while starting a new job she was obliged to take. Her goal was to see the situation in a different light and to get new motivation. The interview was eight weeks after the reflecting session – marked with a (m).

The third client, another man, worked with us the day before a big project had to be introduced to the contractors. He wanted to get some ideas to 2-3 concrete questions. The interview followed six weeks later – marked with an (i).

d) Experiences gained with the pilot projects

1. Goal-setting and individual clarification by the client in advance

Our clients include managers, professionals or any person whishing to get new ideas, impulses and especially time to think about a certain issue.
The phase of preparation is very important:

- The client receives an e-mail with the description of our service and process structure.
- The client is invited to prepare a 5 minutes "issue- picture", for which she or he would like to get new impulses.

"You have to reflect before you talk to them. Because then your ears are sharpened to hear exactly what is most helpful for you – sometimes the information is in between the lines. The personal preparation is definitely one of the key success factors." (c)

"Before the session I was carefully thinking about what to say because I really wanted to bring my message right to the point and not to loose a lot of time with it. I had the feeling that the more I prepare, the easier it is for the reflectors to work with me. I really wanted to make the most out of this half an hour." (m)

2. Reflecting session

As we hear our clients mostly on the phone we welcome the client, introduce ourselves shortly and make sure the client feels comfortable with the teleconference setting.

"Within this short time they managed to create a very informal, familiar and supporting environment, which was so important. I enjoyed having people really care about me"(c)

"In this setting language becomes even more important. You only hear each other. Therefore the emphasis is clearly on talking and listening. As a client you focus on the linguistic ground and the sense of hearing. From this point of view it's quite a focused interaction." (m)

During the phone-call we follow a written structure (given to the client before the meeting):

- The client raises his question and presents his/her issue (5-10 minutes).
- The team is asking clarifying and solution-focused questions concerning the client's issue, skills, abilities, resources, positive exceptions and desired outcome (5 min).

These questions have to be short and precise to give us a good outline and "grounds" to reflect on. During the process the master of ceremonies keeps the time in mind but is mostly just listening when the energy of one phase can be led to the next.

- The team members share what impresses them most about the client and the situation described. They offer their reflections on the issue with modest solution-focused attitude (10 min).

"I liked this step very much. You just relax and listen to the discussion, I felt like a guest." (c)

"The reflecting phase was like a source for me. I was listening very carefully and almost sucking in all the information about what I wanted to hear." (m)

Compared to the Solution-Focused Reflecting team structure (C) we mix appreciation and associations, they come often together in the same sentence.

It is crucial to trust your thoughts and intuition: it's possible to follow the ideas of each other and build on the pictures already delivered, and sometimes it seems to be important to risk a new, very different view.

Sometimes there are very delicate ideas, a kind of presentiment and it takes long minutes until it's possible to tell more about it.

Reflecting together is like a jam session: it's co-creating, a shared flow. Probably that's why we can let it flow freely, without a rule of speech order.

As reflectors it is very important to keep the solution-focused attitude, and to describe and tell the thoughts and ideas as an offering, which the client can either take or leave.

At the end the client may respond briefly whatever is important to him/her (5 min).

One critical moment is when the master of ceremonies addresses the client again. To invite the client back in and to be able to keep "the spell" of the reflecting-round intact is still an experimenting field for us. We realise that clients often "classify" the ideas they picked up from the reflecting-round. We have the idea, that if the client could just keep the ideas floating in his or her head, as they were floating around in the heads of the coaches, they could suddenly begin to be useful the other day, and not immediately land in a "good" or "bad" box. And we think or hope that we can influence this floating state with the choice of our words.

We currently ask our client: "so, you were listening attentively to our talk about your issue. Some of the things you heard might be very useful to you? What do you think was most helpful? Maybe we ask next: So, you just heard all these thoughts, is there anything you want to tell us before we wish you good luck and say goodbye?

Our fascination with reflecting

a) The role of the language.

The choices the "Master of ceremonies" makes in how, how much, how little she/he says may influence the process considerably. "Words create reality" and the more careful this "reality" is offered, the more helpful it will be for the client.

Since a long part of the conversation is indirect (about, but not with the client) all the direct possibilities of a good relationship and making the client feel at home takes place in a very short an precious time.

I guess that's what Steve and Insoo and the team in Milwaukee must have experienced when they "fine-tuned" the miracle question. There's a big AND between being careful and consciously choosing the words AND not want to "make" it but let it rise.

In contrary to the questioning phase with it's short and precise contributions we realized that in the reflecting phase it can be very helpful to let language float. It can help to increase variety.

"They give you some hints some ideas, they open your eyes in other angles. Normally if you talk to someone you get a second opinion, here it's much more than that." (c)

We are very much impressed once again by the power of words.

b) Indirect communication

During the phase of the reflecting the client is not involved in the conversation and can make herself comfortable and just listen to what three maybe total strangers tell her about what they think she has achieved already, what resources there are, what already goes in the direction the client is heading to AND they offer some ideas that might strike them. We think talking indirectly about the customer helps her/him to feel free making use of what is useful and leave without explanation what doesn't make sense to her/him at the moment. For face-to-face setting seams to be important not even look at the client (Andersen 1996: 60)

c) Appreciative attention

All our clients appreciated the fact, that they had three people all for themselves who were listening intently and helped thinking about the issue. This concentration and focus on the matter seems to be very helpful and productive. Isn't it amazing how reflecting developed from the professional obstacle the Norvegian therapists had to overcome, that maybe clients could be hurt by the (not spoken) judgements of the therapists (Andersen 1996: 27) to this just sitting there and letting the affirming ideas flow and tell what seems to fit?

d) Not knowing

The component of not knowing (about the issue and the benefits of the session) is very similar to Solution-Focused coaching – it's just knowing even less. In contrast to coaching, the client does her thinking about the issue much more on her own before the meeting and to 1/3 of the session she can sit back and listen. There's very little we know about the issue and we can't promise too much. We intensively use the working hypothesis that people are autopoietical systems and organize themselves not linear and causal after an intervention. Currently we trust the attraction the client answers with his coming and we also trust the client is the expert to take and leave what she/he wants.

e) Fitting to the client's moment of work

It's not easy to choose the right tool for a certain person at a certain time in a certain situation. With one of our clients we realized that reflecting was not what he was looking for.

"Because I was already very clear about my situation this quite abstract reflection phase was a little bit strange and too unstructured for me. In my case a consulting from an expert in such questions would have been more suitable." (i)

Therefore we are currently thinking about what signs tell us beforehand that reflecting could be the right method to work with clients or not. In general we will always trust in our clients to judge for themselves what seems to be helpful in a specific moment.

f) Adequately unusual

Tom Andersen mentioned in an interview (Hargens Jürgen / von Schlippe Arist 1998: 22) a fact which had sustainable influence to reflecting: He learnt from Mrs. Aadel Bülow-Hansen, a Norwegian physiotherapist, to listen carefully to body signals indicating how fast e.g. a muscle tension relieves. The physiotherapist's hand must operate "adequately unusual“. If she touches too soft, nothing will happen. If she touches too hard, muscles are stimulated but the client is not breathing and therefore the body does not let it go.

This effect of "to be not too unusual“ can be used as well with our Solution-Focused questions and with our reflecting session being “surprising but not too overwhelming”. Consequently we as reflectors are very careful to communicate “adequately unusual”.

g) Work in progress

We understand our work as constructing of descriptions and creating on an in(ter)vention. We like the idea of being in progress and finding out more and more about what reflecting could be and which benefit it could make for our clients. Our awareness is also on talking about reflecting and we are curious, which other ways besides more or less spiritful marketing could be created to let customers know, there's a helping instrument if they want to get a room for reflections inclusive some neutral ears from people thinking with and maybe for him.

Conclusions

Reflecting as an instrument supports divergent thinking. It is an alternative to coaching services with the difference that two or three reflecting people offer helpful thinking and open up new perspectives. In our opinion it is absolutely nessesary even mandatory, that this is done in a affirming, appreciative AND solution-focused attitude. At the moment when customers feel like generating new thoughts, getting a kind of oracle-answers (i.e. an invitation to construct the meaning of what you have heard) can be an effective way of support. Lots of security that you can build up in a Solution-Focused helping conversation (negotiating goals, scaling of progress and co-creating the process by the client) has to be built up very briefly or substituted through trust. It's impossible to get assurance as a reflector whether this form is fitting to the client and his issue. We have to trust that the client has to become his own expert.

Therefore we just have some presentiments about how this impacts the "marketing" of reflecting.

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