

Coaching with a Solutions Focus

by Roland Nagel

In most coaching situations, identifying and analysing a problem becomes the precursor for action planning and subsequent change. Breaking from this traditional mould, 'solutions focused coaching' emphasises the solution rather than the problem, the future rather than the past and a positive focus on what is 'going well' rather than the negative approach of what is 'not working'.

The Philosophy of Solutions Focused Coaching

Based on an originally therapy-based application devised by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, Solutions Focused (SF) Coaching:

- Sees problems as creating the path to the solution. There is no need to analyse the problem and investigate causes, just focus on the solution. In other words, a problem can be solved without its cause being known.
- Focuses on possible solutions that are hidden inside the problems.
- Involves asking useful questions to solve the problem rather than offering predetermined solutions.
- Moves to 'free' the coachee from negative thought systems and beliefs towards the more positive.
- Achieves a more rapid generation of solutions and therefore success
- Provides the coachee with the tools (as described in the next section) necessary to adopt solutions-focused thinking to problem solving. Thereby, the coachee eventually takes ownership of reaching the solution and can adopt this same approach for future problem solving events.

"Each problem that I solved became a rule which served afterwards to solve other problems"

René Descartes (1596 – 1650)
French philosopher and mathematician

In his book 'Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy'¹, Steve de Shazer describes a 'solutions focus' with the following metaphor:

"The complaints that clients (coachees) bring to (the coach) are like locks in doors that open onto a more satisfactory life. The clients have tried everything they think is reasonable, right and good and what they have done was based on their true reality, but the door is still locked, therefore they think their situation is beyond solution. Frequently, this leads to greater and greater efforts to find out why the lock is the way it is or why it does not open. However, it seems clear that solutions are arrived at through keys rather than through locks; and skeleton keys (of various sorts) work in many different kinds of locks. An intervention only need to fit in such a way that the solution evolves. It does not need to match the complexity of the lock. Just because the complaint is complicated does not mean that the solution needs to be as complicated."

The 'Tools' of Solutions Focused Coaching

There are a number of 'tools' which can be used in solutions focused coaching. These are not 'physical tools' such as 360 feedback or other survey instruments often used in executive, team and other workplace coaching, but SF 'tools' are more techniques that can be used systematically to help reach the solution:

Platform and Goal Setting

It is essential to establish the 'platform' or starting point so that the difference between it and the 'future perfect' (described next) can be defined and, once achieved, recognised. From the platform, goals can be set which then become milestones for monitoring progress towards the achievement of the desired outcome. Clarity about their goals helps people create practical solutions.

Future Perfect

There are different terms, which can refer to the 'future perfect' such as the Magic Future, Ideal Final Result, Documentary of Success or just the Miracle. 'Future Perfect' is a tool used to help the coachee describe what would the situation be like if the problem went away overnight.

In prefacing the 'Miracle Question', the coach asks the coachee to pretend that, when arriving at work one morning, the problem has been solved due to an overnight 'miracle'. The coachee is asked to describe what is now different at work because of this miraculous occurrence. When de Shazer introduced this concept, he discussed it in terms of the 'crystal ball' technique.

It is used to project the coachee into a future that is successful. De Shazer contends that by simply having the coachee view his or her future in a 'crystal ball', this can be enough to pre-empt different behaviour thereby leading to a solution.

The rationale behind the 'miracle' question is not just to describe the solution but also to help the coachee articulate how it can be recognised. Therefore, when the solution is realised, the coachee will be in a position to accept that it has actually occurred.

Exceptions, Counters and Keys

Once the 'future perfect' has been described, the coachee may observe 'exceptions' or 'counters'. An exception may occur when an aspect of the 'future perfect' or something even starting to resemble it, has happened. In other words, an exception is a time when the problem does not happen, happens less or is less severe. Within these exceptions or counters, the door to the solution may start to open.

An application of the term, 'the exception proves the rule' is useful to help explain this concept. For example, a manager may have constant difficulty facilitating staff meetings. During a coaching session, an 'exception' is revealed when the meeting was well run. The coachee then identifies what made the meeting successful on this occasion and uses this as a basis for conducting future meetings. The coach's questions enable the manager to see the exception to the rule and adopt this approach in facilitating future staff meetings.

Following from 'counters' the coach helps the coachee find the 'keys' to the solution. Through a systematic approach using the various SF tools, the coachee begins to identify or describe how or when even part of the solution has occurred.

Scaling

Scaling can be used to help the coachee quantify how close we are to the 'future perfect' or the 'miracle'. For example, on a scale from 0 to 10 where 10 means 'future perfect' and 0 means 'we are nowhere', the coachee is asked to rate where we are now. If the coachee responds, 'we are now only at 2', the coach turns this to a positive and by asking 'what has already happened that has made it a 2' and not a '1' or '0'? The focus on the discussion is then on what needs to be done to 'go up the scale', even if only in marginal increments.

Compliments and Affirming

Giving compliments and affirming provide the coachee with positive reinforcement to accelerate reaching the solution. Complimenting or providing positive affirmation is a change in mindset for many people at work who are used to receiving only critical or negative feedback. According to de Shazer, the purpose of the compliment is to produce a 'yes set' that helps the coachee into a frame of mind to accept something new.

This approach also enhances the quality of the rapport and interaction between the coach and coachee. Put simply, 'the action is in the interaction'.

Small actions

As mentioned under 'scaling', it is acceptable to progress even in marginal increments, as small steps will eventually lead to significant differences. A small positive change now can create a 'snowball effect' in which one breakthrough leads to another.

What are the Components of a Typical Solutions Focused Coaching Intervention?

Co-operative Relationship

An important starting point in an SF coaching intervention (or any other coaching activity) is to establish trust and understanding between the coach and coachee. Sometimes referred to as 'socialising', a positive working relationship not only allows any mistakes to be forgiven but also accelerates progress towards the 'future perfect'.

Recognising solvable and unsolvable problems

With solutions focused coaching, it is essential to keep the intervention 'on track' by focusing on solvable issues only. This is achieved when the coachee can define a solution. Without being able to do so, the problem remains 'unsolvable'. The problem is considered unsolvable if it is expressed:

- in a vague or unclear manner
- in terms of what the coachee does not want to see happen or
- in a way where you cannot tell whether or not it has been solved

The problem is also considered 'unsolvable' if the coachee does not want to do anything differently but is only seeking an action or change from someone else.

Encouraging solution talk

Solutions focused coaching discourages 'problem talk' and replaces it with 'solution talk' or 'problem-free talk'. People are more

naturally oriented towards 'problem talk' because they have a greater comfort level when dealing with the past where they can analyse a problem and examine its causes and effects.

'Solution talk' is more about exploring issues that are focused on the desired outcome. This does involve a change in the frame of reference and the coachee is encouraged to talk, in specific concrete terms, about the preferred 'future perfect'. When the coachee starts talking about the solution and relates issues such as intentions and resources, this is positively encouraged, even if it is just a small step forward.

Resources

There are a wide range of resources which coachees have at their disposal to help them achieve the solution, many of which may even be long forgotten by the coachee. There are both concrete and intangible resources. Examples of each include:

- Concrete – communication skills, conflict or crisis management, business insights, time and finances
- Intangible – effort, the will to succeed, company loyalty and collegueship.

Less obvious but no less valuable resources can be experience gained from having to downsize a business, addressing staff morale issues or losing a major client. Even talents such as home renovating, coaching a children's soccer team or caring for an elderly relative are resource talents which can be harnessed to help reach a solution.

Agreeing the next steps

Towards the end of an SF coaching session, it is important to summarise and agree the next steps. These are more likely to be small, incremental steps in the right direction rather than aimed at achieving the desired outcome immediately. Often, the steps are agreed on an experimental basis and, if they are more effective than anticipated, they become a bonus. Smaller steps help develop a momentum which, through tools such as keys, compliments and scaling, should help accelerate reaching 'future perfect'.

Evaluating

As is good general coaching practice, an integral component of SF coaching is the feedback loop to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching intervention. A discussion takes place on how successfully the solution has been implemented and, as a result, whether the desired outcome been achieved. Evaluation helps the coachee move forward by reinforcing positive actions and behaviours and can be of value when future problem solving opportunities arise.

Conclusion

The three main tenets of solutions focused coaching are:

- People need to be willing to change or do something differently. If they do not wish to do so, there is no point in forcing them to participate in a coaching program, especially one that involves solutions focusing
- It is important to do more of what is working – whether this discovery occurs spontaneously or accidentally or even part of it, this behaviour needs to be strengthened
- It is important to stop doing what is not working and, instead, trying something different.

The above suggest that solutions focused coaching is simple and this is true in terms of philosophy, language and directness. However, simple does not mean easy and it is important to apply the techniques in a highly professional, sensitive and systematic manner in order to achieve desired outcomes. With a focus on goals, solutions and the application of personal strengths and experiences ('resources'), solutions-focused coaching has ideal applications for people at work.

1. 1985, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York, pages xv-xvi.

2. Being a subjective scale, it is does not matter how the coachee responds



About the author

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