

**Coaching – reduced to the maximum
by Peter Szabó**

Introduction to Solution-focused Brief Coaching



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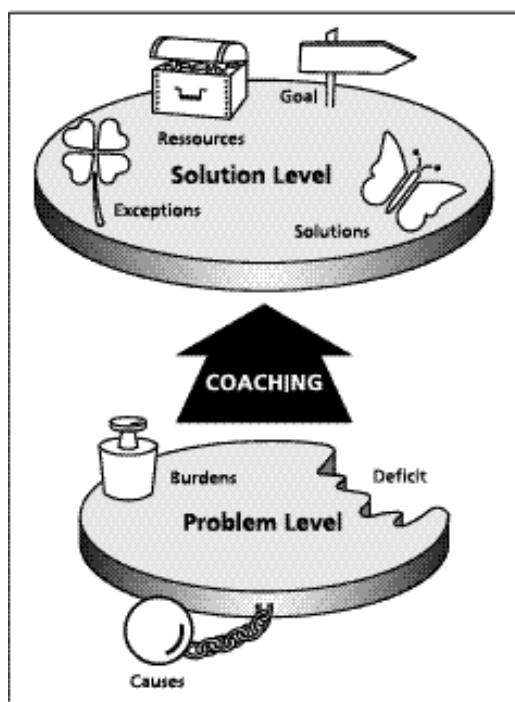
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Short, simple and successful

Like other service providers, especially in these times of rapid change, coaches must ensure a high level of performance and excellent results. Professionals undertaking coaching are looking for the quickest possible success. And the personal skills clients can develop through coaching are among the most sought-after qualities in the modern business world.

More than enough reason, therefore, to examine the efficiency of the coaching process in greater detail. Which factors are crucial in achieving coaching success as simply as possible? Which assumptions will help you to reach the goal as quickly as possible? Which activities should you avoid to maximize your efficiency as a coach?

It is in response to these questions that **solution-focused brief coaching** (see Fig. 1) emerges as a particularly interesting alternative to traditional problem-solving methods.



In solution-focused brief coaching, **questions** are asked in such a way as to move the client's attention to the level of solutions. Instead of discussing problems, difficulties and causes, the coach explores with the client **desired goals**, **exceptions which have led to success** in the past (times when the problem did not occur), and **solutions** (the changes that will have occurred once the goal is reached) as well as **existing resources**.

Figure 1: Solution-focused brief coaching

This procedure is especially suited to the business environment, because these clients are already familiar with many of the questions you will ask, eg, about defining goals and visions, best practices, or knowledge management. But the mix of questions is unusual, the order in which they are asked is surprising, and, best of all, the step-by-step solution-focused procedure is truly unique.

Three stages in reaching solutions

In the first stage, clients and coach discuss the **desired future** (Figure 2) and the changes that would be involved in reaching them. This goal definition phase is similar to other coaching approaches. However, particular attention is focused on the moment when the goal is reached. The client describes their vision of the future, in the greatest possible detail. In contrast, no information is gathered about the problem.

In the second stage, clients and coach discuss the recent past, looking for **early existing signs** of changes in the direction of the desired state. In this phase, the coach only asks questions about what is already working well. This helps the client to identify possible steps forward and strengthens their existing resources.

In the third stage, clients attempt to put into practice what has been discussed so far. Usually, an **experimental phase** is agreed upon, which involves minor changes in everyday activities. The experiments are defined so as to focus the client's attention on solutions that will work.

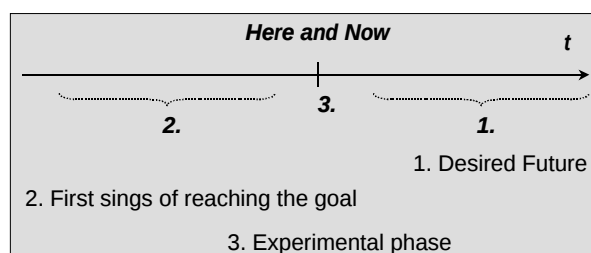


Figure 2: The three stages of solution-building

Identifying solutions rather than solving problems

In our culture, it is most common to focus on problems and their causes, analyzing and diagnosing so

that a solution can be found. The solution-focused process dispenses with problem analysis. Instead of focusing on understanding the problem better, the time available is spent learning as much as possible about goals, solutions and resources. As a rule, once clients have put discussing the problem behind them, they are surprised how much they have to say about the solution. It almost feels as if they did not have this information earlier, and only discovered it during the conversation.

Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, 'No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it'. Solution-focused coaching thus avoids drawing attention to the problem. It prefers to draw clients' conscious attention to solutions. The Miracle Question is typical of this process, 'Let us assume that a miracle has happened and that your problem has been solved. What will you then...?'

Avoiding questions about the details of the problem offers the following advantages:

- Coaching requires less time.
- Clients find it easier to work out appropriate solutions. The greater the detail and the more precisely clients speak of past and future solutions, the more choices they realize are available to them. The coach can help to build the clients solution awareness in such a way that it is solid enough for everyday use.
- Clients' confidence in trying out solutions is increased. The more their resources and abilities are discussed, the easier the situation appears, and the more motivated clients are to put their solutions into practice. After all, words create reality.
- Moreover, solution-oriented awareness helps clients increasingly to see themselves – and to behave – as experts. If the person who is searching can find the solution themselves, the coach only needs to help them identify options, goals, resources, and solutions.

An attempt at explanation

Naturally, such a paradigm shift seems a little strange in the beginning. It may even seem to lack what, up to now, and based on our own experience, we have considered logical and effective. But the solution-focused approach is the result of empirical studies on the question, 'How does counseling work?'. Results showed that concentrating on solutions, and only on solutions, enabled participants to reach their goals in less time and just as efficiently as other methods.

New theoretical findings from other fields of science support these surprising results and make it easier to understand them.

- **Chaos theory:** Complex systems in an unstable balance develop most efficiently when they control themselves. The complexity of the influencing factors is so great that our linear way of looking at things from the perspective of cause and effect reaches its limits. Why not leave out the analysis and the reduction to the causes of the problem and concentrate instead on identifying the smallest changes which have led in the desired direction, thereby becoming aware of the forces that support them.
- **Constructivism:** If there is no objective reality, and if each of us constructs our reality on the basis of our subjective awareness, why not help our clients to construct as helpful a reality for themselves as possible? The Miracle Question, for example, often helps clients leave old and restrictive ways of thinking behind, and develop solutions in an unencumbered and creative manner. The more 'exceptions' that the client can identify as signs of the miracle having already begun to take shape, the more confidence he will have in his solution constructions.
- **Cybernetics:** The logic of the failure of the management of complex systems has been sufficiently investigated. It is easier to prevent what we don't want than to achieve precisely what we do want. Thus it is fairly simple for a coach to interrupt the problem awareness that is preventing the solution of the problem. Instead of doing more of the same thing that does not work, ('try harder' problem awareness), focusing on solutions ('try something different' solution awareness) makes room for new approaches. Based on experience, the results are positive. Even if the solutions do not (immediately) hit the spot, they are a step in the right direction.
- **Systems theory:** Every change in any part of a system influences the future interactions of everyone involved. If clients begin to describe their goals and solutions, as well as how other people will react, differently, their relationships with other people will also change. If clients concentrate on solutions within a system and become aware of them, useful changes are easier to introduce and maintain.
- **Communication theory:** As coaches, we realise that we can never fully and accurately understand what our clients wish to tell us. So, since we are anyway going to interpret subjectively, why not assume that whatever our clients say about solutions makes sense? The coach should always consider what the client says useful and helpful. Investigations into very different forms of counseling have shown that appreciative and client-centered coaches are especially effective.

Practical examples – simple, but not easy

The solution-focused procedure is simple. But consistently adopting the appropriate attitude when coaching is not. To conclude therefore ... some examples from my own experience as a solution-focused coach:

- A close friend told me about a serious quarrel he had had with a colleague. I was very tempted to discuss the problem and to learn more about the circumstances and details of the conflict. The challenge for me was to awaken his solution-oriented awareness and to ask him, for example, what he thought should remain the same in his relationship with his colleague. Or to help him decide what response was most likely to be successful. I was unable to do either of these. Because of our friendship, I felt his pain and sorrow strongly. Switching to the 'solution level' seemed too harsh for me as a caring friend.
- Another client was a victim of bullying. I was tempted to concentrate on and solve the bullying issue with her. The challenge for me was to keep focusing on the day after the 'miracle' had happened, to help her talk about how self-assured and proactive she would be then. With every meeting, she was able to give me more examples of situations where she had been able to assert herself – at least partially – which helped her to regain self-confidence. However, finding such examples and helping her to become aware of them was hard work. At the beginning, because of the enormous amount of external strain, she answered almost all my solution questions with more information about the problem. However, by our fifth meeting, she had built up enough energy and motivation to apply successfully for a new job. Until then, despite her excellent professional qualifications, she had been unable to get a new job because she had seemed so desperate and defeated in interviews.
- A manager came to me before a very important sales negotiation. He asked me to provide him with guaranteed strategies for success. It looked as if he wanted pure professional advice. I had major doubts whether my coaching questions would be able to achieve the desired results. I made a large number of suggestions, especially because his negotiation tactics looked somewhat clumsy to me. Naturally, he ignored my advice. Because I was getting desperate, I asked him about his goals for the negotiation, whereupon we began to discover success factors from earlier negotiations he had led. Our meetings suddenly began to bear fruit. We were able to identify useful and suitable behavioral patterns very clearly and in great detail. In the end, the manager approached the negotiations with great inner self-assuredness and justifiable confidence. Later on, he told me that what had helped him most was that I had shown him so clearly that I trusted in his abilities.
- A quality assurance team wanted to improve their internal communication. A two-day communication-skills workshop had been budgeted for and I had a large number of communication exercises that I had used many times in the past. With some effort I persuaded myself to hold only two or three two-hour meetings instead. At my first meeting with the team, at one of their regular meetings, we applied the progression scale. This helps members of a team to evaluate the quality of their current internal communication. (This team's estimate was an average of 3.9 on a scale of 10.) They then defined what they would do differently if they were at 4.9 on the scale. Finally, I asked them to give me a personal (and confidential) prognosis of where they would be in two week's time (our next meeting) and how this could be measured. I also asked them to keep observing and noting down things that were already happening that would fulfill their prognosis. At our next meeting, three weeks later, I asked them 'What is better about your internal communication?' They reported on their observations and agreed that many things were even better than their prognosis. They all felt that their team communication had now improved sufficiently and that they would be able to maintain this improvement. I had fulfilled my task in two short meetings without using any of the old communication-skills exercises I still had stored away in a drawer.
- A service industry merger. For two years, 300 employees had been battling with the consequences of a merger. It seemed as if the differences between the two corporate cultures were insurmountable. One process that is often used in this situation is to work out new, shared corporate guidelines using pin boards and cards. We took a major risk and suggested a leap forwards in time instead. We divided all 300 employees into small mixed groups and asked them to pretend that two years had gone by, and that, during this period, cooperation had improved significantly. This hypothetical approach towards finding a solution exceeded all our expectations. The participants communicated with one another in a way that would have been inconceivable before they took their mental time leap. They went on to observe new and sustainable changes their everyday work. The next intervention has yet to take place. It will be about helping them to perceive the progress they have made and to maintain it.

For coaches, it requires much self-discipline to remain solution-focused and client-centered. Nevertheless, it is always a worth-while adventure, because it helps clients find their own effective solutions very quickly. Furthermore, it frees coaches from the burden of problem-solving, thereby trustfully placing responsibility in the hands of the true expert – the client!

Orthopedic medical rehabilitation combined with solution-focused counseling.

A comparative study carried out by the insurance industry in the US achieved remarkable results. The investigation focused on industrial workers who were unable to do their jobs due to back injuries. The study compared healing success rates in injured workers who had had solution-focused brief counseling, and in those who had not.

	Group investigated	Comparatory group
Medical therapy	6 weeks	6 weeks
Solution-focused brief counseling	6 hours	0 hours
Take-up of work after 6 weeks	64%	4%

A solution-oriented discussion on the subject of coaching

An experienced coach (C) has a solution-oriented discussion with a coach in training who takes on the part of the client (K) in this conversation. The coach's questions reflect the typical structure of a solution-focused discussion. The client's replies are not all printed in full.

First stage – Expectations of the future

C: What needs to happen here today, so that later on, you will be able to say that it was worthwhile discussing coaching with me?

K: If I acquired new ways and methods of becoming a very effective coach. If I could put my finger quickly on what is essential, in order to be able to concentrate only on useful questions (...).

C: How would that be different for you?

K: I would appreciate what I do as a coach more if I could see that my clients were making progress. I would be sure that I was doing things right.

C: And how would your clients know that you are doing things right?

K: They would experience success more quickly. They might gain more confidence in their power designing a solution. And they would also have more choices (...).

C: My next question may seem a little strange. It takes some imagination to answer it. Suppose that you go home after our meeting, that you go to bed

tonight, and that, while you are sleeping, a miracle happens. And the miracle is, that the reason why you came here is solved – just like that! But since you are asleep you will have no idea that the miracle is taking place. How will you begin to discover tomorrow morning that a miracle has happened and that you have reached all your goals as a coach?

K: I haven't a clue... (long pause)... It would only become clear to me shortly before a coaching session that I have tomorrow. I would probably feel rested, calm and confident that the coaching will go well.

C: And how will your client know that the miracle has happened?

K: She will think that my welcome is especially warm this morning. (...) She will realize that I look different, that I lean back, that I am very self-confident and nevertheless interested and curious about what she has to say.

C: How will you know that your client knows?

K: I think I would see her feel more relaxed. She would be able to develop interesting new ideas and would realize that her ideas are really good.

C: And what would you do then?

K: I would pay special attention to solution strategies and my client's existing abilities, and would draw her attention to them. (...) I think I would also be able to let go of my own ideas about what she should do more easily.

Second stage: Signs that the goal is being reached

C: Looking back over the last few days, when was there a coaching situation in which you already felt a little bit the way that you will feel on the morning after the miracle?

K: Last Thursday, only for a moment, I had a conversation that made me feel really good.

C: How did you do that?

K: I spontaneously thought of two questions that helped the other person to get on to the right track.

C: How did you know that you should ask precisely those two questions?

K: The first question was easy: I asked her, 'What do you wish to achieve now?'. I had already had good experiences with asking that question in the past and I asked her quite automatically.

With the second question it was actually the client herself who gave me the idea. She said, 'I'm sure my boss doesn't want it the way I thought'. So I asked her what her boss wanted instead. And at that moment everything fell into place. I don't even know what idea she came up with, because all she said was 'Oh, right!' and she grinned and walked away.

C: What would you say you did to make things fall into place for her?

K: I didn't feel as if I had to suggest any good ways forward. I just listened attentively to her answers. She is someone I really like and admire, so I just trusted her to find a solution all by herself.

C: OK, great. Now, on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the moment you realized that you had certain qualities as a coach, and 10 being the morning after the miracle. Where would you place your current coaching qualities on this scale?

K: At about 4, I guess.

C: OK, so what makes it a 4 already?

K: I have improved my skills in not offering advice. I can listen attentively and pay full attention to what the client says. I can also trust in my ability sometimes to ask truly helpful spontaneous questions.

C: Great. Now back to the conversation that took place last Thursday. Where would you place your coaching on the scale?

K: That was a 9, I guess.

C: And how will you realize that you have taken a step forward and that you have reached 5 on the scale?

K: If I actually begin to look forward to the meeting the next day and can sit through it calmly and relax. Then I will have reached a 5.

C: On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you will be successful tomorrow?

K: 9.

Third stage: Experimental stage

C: I am very impressed by how important it is to you to let go as a coach, and also by your ability to be truly client-centered. I would like to suggest a small experiment. It will require about a minute per day and will be fun. Would you like me to tell you about it?

K: Sure, it sounds exciting.

C: Good. Make a list which you update every evening. Let us say for the next five days. Note down *everything that happens during your coaching meetings that you want to continue happening in the future.*

K: OK, but I would prefer to update the list in the morning. That would be a nice way to start the day.

C: Sure, good luck!

Second session

The standard focus for the second and the following sessions is on solutions and resources that popped up in the meantime:

- What is better? What else? What would other people say?
- How did you manage to do that?
- How can you maintain your progress?

Less coaching, greater success

A group of scientists, working with sociologists **Steve de Shazer** and **Insoo Kim Berg** in the USA, investigated the art of reducing counseling to the maximum very intensively and with great success. Over the course of about twenty years, the team examined and identified what is especially useful in client / counselor conversations in order to **provide clients with a successful way of reaching their goals.**

This resulted in the development of **solution-focused brief counseling**, a simple procedure which leads to the rapid identification of sustainable and effective solutions. In concrete terms, this means that, by systematically refraining from counseling activities that are of little use, the time investment can be reduced to an average of **three meetings**, each lasting 50 minutes. This form of counseling has proved to be sustainable and effective, with a **success rate of 86%**, as shown by studies carried out after 6 and 18 months. This research has led to a silent revolution in the world of therapy. The team has been active at the Brief Family Therapy Center (**BFTC**) in **Milwaukee** since 1978.

Additional Links

www.brief-therapy.org is the original website of the founders at the BFTC in Milwaukee.

www.thesolutionsfocus.com contains information on solution orientation in business environments

www.reteaming.com applies a simple solution-focused procedure with teams

www.appreciative-inquiry.org presents solution-focused work in OD

Suggested Reading

The Solutions Focus – the simple way to positive change

by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow

Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2002.