

## IN FOCUS: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS – FINDING THE SOLUTION

Do you ever find yourself going around in circles with a difficult colleague, struggling to motivate your team, or feeling overwhelmed by problems that you simply cannot resolve? **Linda Aspey** believes a solution focused approach can help.

When things go wrong, we instinctively seek to make them right. Yet sometimes it seems the harder we try to understand, analyse, or fix the problem, the worse it gets, leaving the people concerned deflated and frustrated.

However, as many philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists have recognised, a positive approach often yields significantly better results. One powerful example of this is an approach known as solution focused (SF) – originally pioneered as a therapeutic tool in the 1980s by family psychotherapists Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, who had noticed that when they spent more time with clients focusing on solutions, rather than on problems, those clients often made quicker progress.

Unlike practitioners of more traditional approaches, they felt it unnecessary to know all the details of a client's problem – encouraging them instead to explore what life could be like without it. In the process, the pair deduced that people are inherently resourceful (though they may not know it), and that the more problems those people have had to face, the more

resourceful they are likely to be. They came to believe that the client was the expert in their own life and probably already doing quite a few things that were working well, rather than needing to be told what they were doing wrong and how to fix it. Importantly, they did not stop listening nor did they attempt to rush clients to a solution but with skilful questioning, they helped them to change the focus.

In short, SF brings attention to:

- the positive, rather than the negative;
- the present and future, as opposed to the past; and
- the solution, rather than the problem.

Since the 1980s, SF has been adapted for use across many fields of development and education. I have used it for many years in corporate contexts including executive coaching, group facilitation, and change management – and even the most cynical and pragmatic clients have appreciated its impact and applicability.

Although SF is essentially a conversational tool, once the

principles become familiar you will find it equally useful in thinking through your own issues alone. It can be used with bosses, peers, clients, direct reports, and also when coaching people to work with or manage others. Here is how it works...

### Core principles of the SF approach

The main principles of the SF approach are as follows:

- look for resources rather than deficits – find out what the existing strengths are;
- build on successes – once you know what works, do more of it;
- if it is not working, do something different;
- look to the preferred future not the past;
- explore what is already contributing to the preferred future, so that it can be built upon;
- accept that people are the experts in all aspects of their own lives;
- understand that small steps can genuinely make a big difference; and
- have expectations of good outcomes.

There are three basic questions that are also helpful in using the SF approach to best effect:

- what are your best hopes for this discussion/session/meeting/training course? This establishes a goal and ensures someone sets their own agenda. Using the word 'hopes' rather than 'goals', subtly acknowledges that problems do impact on people personally, and also generates a sense of optimism.

Once people use positive, future-focused language, they start to make improvements

- what would your day/week/job/ life look like if these hopes were realised? When people can envision a future where the goal is achieved, they are much more likely to take action.
- what are you already doing or what have you done in the past that might contribute to these hopes being realised? This highlights what is already working or has worked, acknowledging that small steps make a difference and that the person is resourceful, which helps in building confidence.

Other ways to stimulate thinking include:

- posing the 'miracle' question – ask the following: 'If you imagine for a moment that the problem miraculously disappeared overnight – what would you see/feel /experience that would tell you the problem had gone?'

This approach helps someone in trying to express their preferred future. Follow up by asking for detail as this enables someone to build up a strong picture;

- encouraging scaling – asking someone to quantify an issue offers a way for them to recognise the impact of a situation. For instance, you might ask, 'On a scale of 0-10, with 10 being your most confident about revenues, and 0 being the opposite, where would you score?'

Scaling often makes it possible to say the otherwise impossible.

People who find it hard to articulate their feelings can often reveal more in a number than they can in words. A low number can give the opportunity to explore what is happening that makes the situation a 5 and not a 10, while a high number helps to identify what is already going well.

- identifying and analysing the exceptions – SF assumes there will always be exceptions, ie circumstances when a problem is not occurring, but that people tend not to notice these exceptions because they only look for and see the problem. Once they can identify these exceptions they can do more of whatever it is that is working to cause or facilitate the exception.

To encourage identification of such exceptions, you might say something along the following lines: 'You said that Ian and Carlos always argue when you put them to work together. Can you recall a time when they didn't argue?.... What was different?'

- pointing out resources – looking for the resources a person has is a powerful way of acknowledging that they are resourceful and not helpless. Resources may be skills, experience, people, or tools.

You might, for example, say: "You've said in the past that you find talking to the CEO a bit daunting. How did you manage to have that tough conversation with him yesterday?'

## Box 1 CORE PRINCIPLES

Look for resources rather than deficits – what are the strengths in the situation?

Build on successes – once you know what works, do more of it.

If it is not working, do something different.

Look to the preferred future not the past.

Explore what is already contributing to the preferred future that can be built upon.

Remember that people are the experts in all aspects of their own lives.

Accept that small steps can genuinely make a big difference.

Have expectations of good outcomes.

What else? The richer the detail, the more powerful the picture and the more resourceful the person will feel.

"So if you were better prepared, you'd be feeling a lot more confident about giving the presentation. What else would you be noticing?"

Once people use positive, future-focused language, they start to make improvements. Like athletes who visualise themselves first at the finishing post, taking a solution focused approach energises, motivates and makes the vision seem attainable. And as Henry Ford is credited with saying: "If you think you can, or think you can't, you're probably right." ■



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