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Coaching as Organisational Development



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Creating a coaching culture one conversation at a time:

Solutions-focused coaching at John Laing Integrated Services

Janine Waldman



How can an organisation create a coaching culture one conversation at a time? This article looks at how John Laing Integrated Services (JLIS) used the solutions-focused approach to raise management performance and support the business through a time of significant growth. It describes how a solutions-focused coaching programme was cascaded through the organisation and became embedded in the business, leading to long-term, sustainable change.

Keywords

Solutions focus, change management, culture change, coaching, organisational development, constructive conversations

Introduction

Imagine an organisation where managers take every opportunity to praise what's going well and to recognise and appreciate the contributions that individuals make. Where conversations are about what's wanted, rather than what went wrong. Where people talk about their ideal future, rather than the disappointing past. Where meetings start with the question 'what's working' as opposed to 'what's the problem?' What would an organisation need to do to make this happen, and what impact would it have on the performance of individual team members, teams and the business as whole?

how one organisation ... gradually changed the culture of the business, one conversation at a time

This article looks at how one organisation – John Laing Integrated Services – took on this challenge and gradually changed the culture of the business, one conversation at a time, through a solutions-focused coaching programme. In the three years since the initiative was launched, 32 managers have completed the programme, over 60 people have received coaching from internal coaches and solutions-focused coaching conversations are now part of day-to-day communications within the organisation.

The business has seen significant benefits, including a shift from negativity and a focus on what is not working to a focus on strengths, successes and what is wanted. Meetings have become more productive, key strategic projects that were

floundering have got off the ground successfully, and the organisation estimates it has saved thousands of pounds through development of more efficient working practices.

The Business Issue

John Laing Integrated Services (JLIS) is a support services and facilities management company providing project management and front-line services for public and private sector clients in education, rail, the police, housing, local authorities, health and waste.

Now employing more than 870 people, the company was established in 2000 to support parent company John Laing plc in the private and public partnership market. It has experienced rapid growth in recent years with turnover increasing 400 per cent in the four years up to 2008. This was accompanied by a rise in staff numbers and significant expansion of the management team. The business continued to grow, despite the economic climate, doubling both its size and turnover. By 2011, the organisation expects to be employing over 1,000 people.

JLIS operates in a tough market with demanding clients, tight timescales and challenging performance measures. Tim Grier, Managing Director, recognised that as the business was growing, managers' jobs were getting more complex and diverse and they needed more support to help them achieve targets and deliver what clients wanted.

There was already a strong emphasis on management development and continuous improvement within the business. Grier wanted a development approach which would raise the bar and have a profound, long-lasting impact on how the company did business. He began to look for a development intervention that would help the management team step away from the day-to-day operational issues and take a more consistent and strategic approach to their role. In particular, he wanted to equip managers with tools and skills to delegate effectively, pro-actively develop their teams and make better quality decisions.

“John Laing has been expanding and as a result so have we,” said Grier. “We’re winning new business and contracts, often long-term partnerships of 15, 20 25 years duration. We’ve got an expanding team and the directors and the wider management team have got more and more to do. We had to find a way to raise capability and performance within the business – and we wanted to ensure that the approach we chose would be sustainable and would support our plans for continued growth.”

The JLIS senior management team were already converts to the idea of using coaching as a development tool. One of the directors had already come across the solutions-focused approach to coaching and felt it would help engender a more

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positive, co-operative and collaborative culture within the business.

JLIS invited the team from coaching and change consultancy *The Solutions Focus* to help develop, evolve and embed a coaching programme to help senior managers shift their focus from 'what went wrong' to 'what's going right' and 'how can we do more of it'.

The Solutions Focus Approach

While some conventional styles of coaching involve an analysis of 'the problem', the solutions focus approach sidesteps the cause of the trouble and heads straight for the solution. The idea is to help the client envisage his desired future and move swiftly towards it, by identifying what's already working well and using this to achieve more of what's wanted.

The solutions-focused philosophy has its roots in 1970s family therapy in the United States, when leading-edge therapists (*Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer*) realised that you don't have to analyse peoples' problems to help them improve their lives. Using this fundamental insight, the therapists asked individuals to describe their preferred future and helped them to take steps towards it.

The approach is particularly powerful when applied to the day-to-day conversations that take place between people in organisations

This solutions-focused methodology is now a widely recognised approach that is being used in organisations worldwide to help manage change, resolve conflict, develop leaders and managers and transform corporate culture. The approach is particularly powerful when applied to the day-to-day conversations that take place between people in organisations. *"Conversation is the fundamental unit of change. If you change the conversation, then there's every chance you'll change everything that surrounds it,"* says Paul Z Jackson, co-author (with the writer of this article) of the recent book 'Positively Speaking'. *"Culture change within an organisation really can start just by simply changing the nature of the conversations that people have."*

Constructive Conversations

Jackson suggests that to understand this concept, we only have to reflect on our own recent conversations. Some will have been energising, informative, enjoyable and helped us make progress, while others were no doubt difficult, draining and full of misunderstandings.

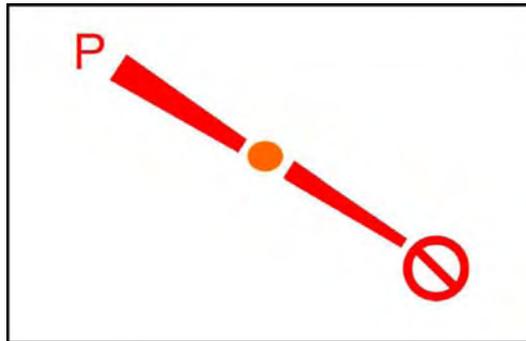
A constructive conversation is any conversation in which the participants make progress

The solutions focus approach to coaching gives people the tools and techniques they need to have more constructive conversations, more of the time. A constructive conversation is any conversation in which the participants make progress. Maybe a relationship with a colleague improves, a member of the team is clearer about exactly what they are required to do or people feel more motivated and ready to take on the next challenge.

The following models illustrate how this strategic approach can be applied to the

whole range of activities that take place in a work setting.

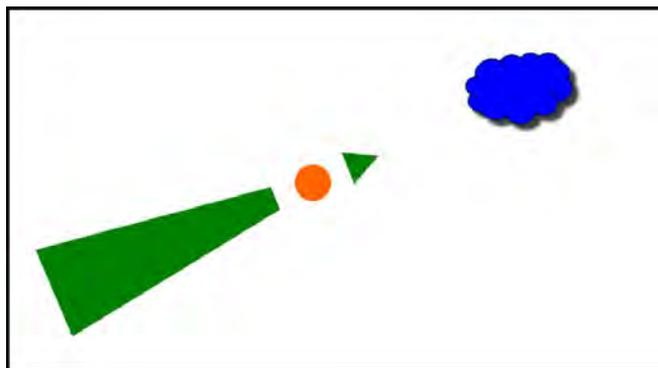
A Problem-focused Model



In the problem-focused model:

- Time is represented along the horizontal axis from past to future.
- The dot in the middle stands for the current situation.
- The P on the left is a problem – arising in the past.
- The  represents the 'dreaded future' - what will happen if we keep going in this direction.
- The red lines connecting these points represent respectively an analysis of how we got from the original problem to where we are now and an extrapolation or prediction of what will happen to take us from the current position to the dreaded future.
- We call this the Problem axis.

The Solutions-Focus Model: find what works and do more of it



The solutions strategy model explores a diagonally contrasting axis, which runs through the same current position. On this axis, the fluffy cloud on the right is the Future Perfect – a preferred state in which current problems have vanished.

When we look back to the past to discover what it is that has been happening in our organisation, we look at those aspects that are already taking us in the direction we want to go. This rich combination of skills, resources and examples provides the

fuel, the encouragement, the motivation and sense of possibility to choose what small step to take next – a step in the direction of the Future Perfect.

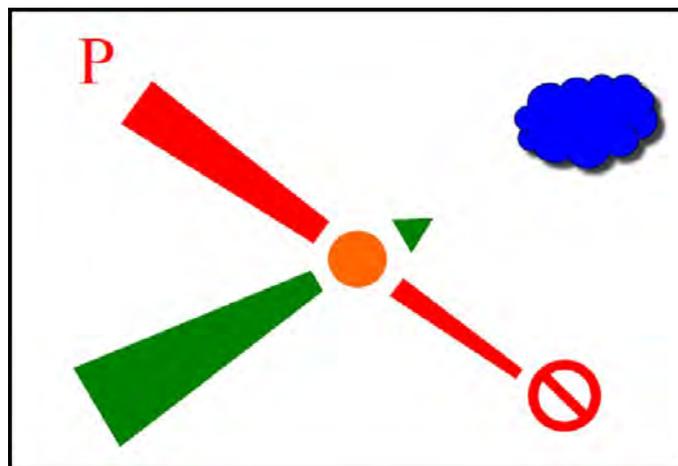
Traditionally, we assume that learning about the problem will help with working towards a solution. But here we can see that the problem axis and solution axis are different and independent. Finding out about the problem makes us experts on the problem – which is usually better overlooked. Once we do more of what we already know works, we can notice its impact and chose to do more of it if it proves useful.

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The art of the constructive conversation is to engage people along the solutions axis. Sometimes they will join you there readily and easily; sometimes you can use one of a range of solutions focus 'tools' to help them switch at some point from problem axis to solutions axis.

Often the most significant moment in a constructive conversation is the point at which people shift from problem to solution, as shown in the diagram below.

From dispiriting to energising conversations



The Solutions Focus Model was developed by Jackson and McKergow

Tim Grier particularly liked the idea of this approach for JLIS because of its potential to help people move away from a pre-occupation about what might be 'holding them back' towards an understanding of how they could move forward and achieve the desired results.

"It takes away the bullshit and waffle and cuts to the chase, while still recognising success at the same time," he says. "It helps us understand where we are and gives us the opportunity to reflect on our achievements and attainments."

Developing the Programme

The team from *The Solutions Focus* worked alongside the JLIS board to design a coaching programme which would start with the senior management team and be cascaded down through the organisation.

The team from The Solutions Focus

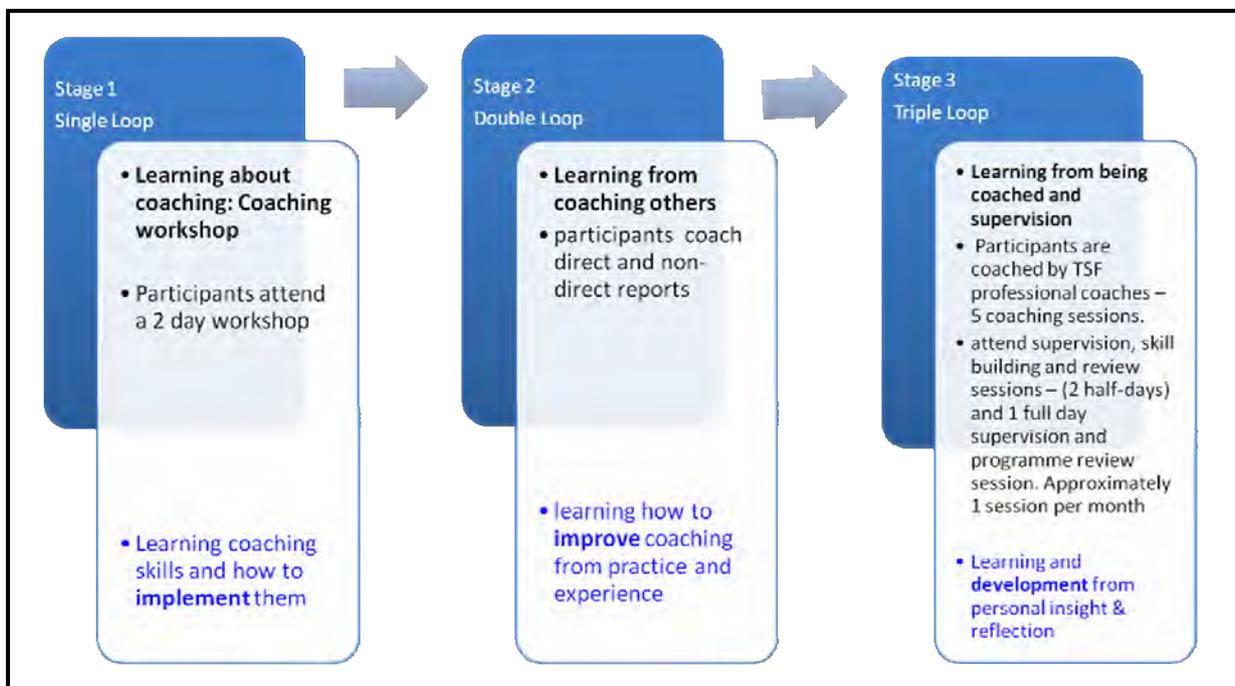
The aim was that over time the solutions-focused coaching approach would

worked alongside the JLIS board become embedded into the culture of the organisation and become ‘the way we do things around here’. Grier wanted to see managers using solutions-focused coaching skills on a regular basis, as part of their day-to-day work. He envisaged that a common language would emerge, that managers would start to use the approach with clients and stakeholders as well as with employees, and that the coaching process would become intrinsically linked with career development within the organisation. A key objective was that the business should ultimately ‘own’ the programme, with those who took part in the development eventually going on to become internal coaches themselves.

A key objective was that the business should ultimately ‘own’ the programme The management committed themselves to adopt the programme, with everyone taking the approach of ‘how can we make this work’ rather than ‘will it work?’ We asked the senior team, for example, to envisage what the organisation would look like in the future, when solutions-focused coaching had become truly embedded. We encouraged them to think about what was already happening internally that might contribute towards this aim and to identify the small but significant steps they could take to help move the project forward.

Programme Design

The Solutions Focus incorporated the principles of Triple Loop Learning into the design of the programme. Triple Loop Learning involves ‘learning how to learn’ by reflecting on the process of learning. The diagram below shows how this worked in practice in JLIS.



Model adapted from the original developed by Shaun Lincoln, Centre for Excellence in Leadership (2004), Based on the learning loop work of Argyris and Schon (1978)

This design reinforces long-term sustainable change as participants are in effect

This design reinforces long-term sustainable change as participants are in effect learning about learning

learning about learning. They are learning about coaching, putting their skills immediately into action and reflecting on this through receiving coaching and supervision.

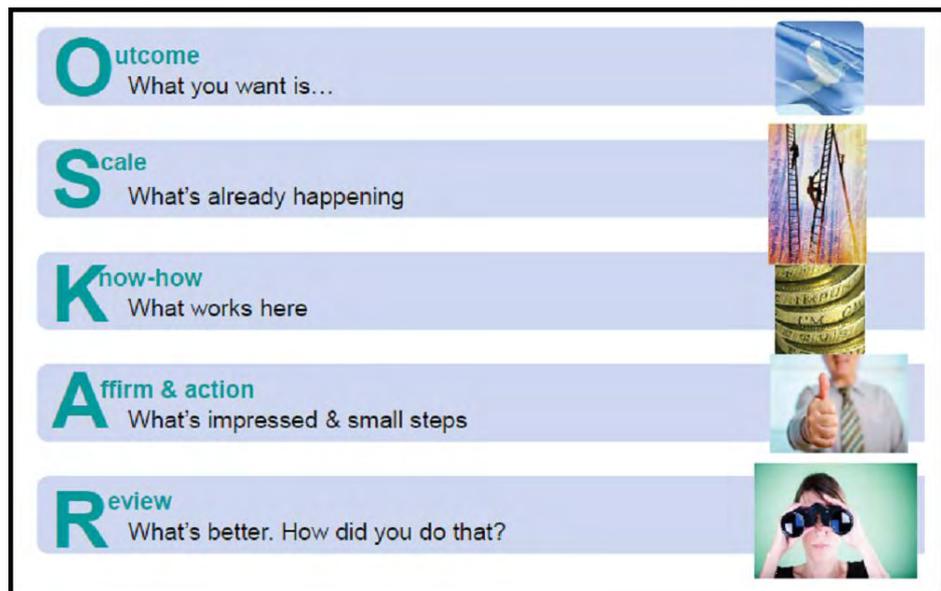
Getting Started

We kicked off the programme with a two-day workshop where a group of eight directors learnt how to use solutions-focused coaching to help improve performance in their teams. We equipped them with tools and techniques to apply to all aspects of their work, from one-to-one coaching conversations with direct reports to strategic planning of projects. One key tool was OSKAR - a framework developed by Jackson and McKergow (2008) which provides a series of steps for structuring a coaching conversation and finding a way forward.

OSKAR is an acronym for Outcome, Scaling, Know-How, Affirm, Action and Review

OSKAR is an acronym for *Outcome, Scaling, Know-How, Affirm, Action and Review*. It helps people establish a starting point for a constructive conversation, notice the good things that are already happening and plan the small steps that will help them move forward.

The OSKAR Route



Over the six months following the initial workshops, the directors each had six one-to-one sessions with a professional coach and gained practical experience by coaching two people from outside their teams. We held extra skill building and supervision sessions to help them develop their skills further, review progress, share their experiences and discuss issues as they arose. Attendance on the programme was high despite busy schedules, with directors making sure they made time available to be coached and to coach others.

Attendance on the programme was high despite busy schedules

Rolling out the programme

This first programme was run as a pilot and adapted and improved as it went along. This approach reflected the *triple learning loop* principle that had been applied to

the original design, enabling the organisation to *learn about learning* as it went along.

SF coaching conversations between programme participants



We designed and managed the programme in a solutions-focused way, which added to its emergent nature

We designed and managed the programme in a solutions-focused way, which added to its emergent nature: the organisation was able to navigate change by identifying opportunities and responding to them as they arose. In other words, it was able to identify what was working, evolve its 'future perfect' over time and take small steps toward achieving it.

Phase one was extremely well received, with participants reporting they were seeing immediate results from their application of solutions-focused coaching.

"When you apply this approach it means that there is no negativity and everything is regarded in a positive light – which really changes people's behaviour," explains HR Director Justine Brown.

Learning OSKAR the experiential way



"From a personal perspective, I am learning to delegate and coach my staff, rather than taking things from them and doing it myself. If staff speak to me about an issue then I will use the techniques I have learnt in the coaching course to help them see how they can progress the issue." ‘

JLIS asked the directors who participated in the initial programme to identify people from the broader management team who they felt would be pivotal in taking the business forward – and we included this second group of 12 managers in the next phase. The programme really started to make an impact during this second phase, when solutions-focused conversations started happening in all corners of the

business. Participants reported feeling more confident in their management abilities and said they were finding it much easier to concentrate on the strategic aspects of their role and communicate clearly with their teams.

“My confidence and self belief are much higher – and using this approach has helped to keep my workload down as I’m not taking everything on myself,” says Jackie Oliver, Commercial Manager and JLIS internal coach.

For Business Systems Manager Alan Batt, one of the main advantages of the approach is that it creates change on a gradual, incremental basis and ensures projects don’t lose momentum.

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“My favourite bit is working towards the outcome in smaller steps, rather than attempting to take huge steps. It’s a lot less stressful and keeps things achievable and moving forward,” he explains. “It’s something that can be used day-to-day as part of the normal management process. It stops us getting bogged down in the issues and the background noise of who said what to whom, and why it’s not working. We are spending more time looking at what people do well and learning from it and we are able to look at the demands on us and find solutions.”

Sandra Bruce-Gordon, General Manager of one of JLIS’s local authority projects, says this step-by-step approach has also had a major effect on motivation within her team. People are able to celebrate small successes on a regular basis, which helps to maintain energy and enthusiasm.

“Instead of waiting a year to blow out the birthday candles you can have several slices of celebratory cake on the way to the milestone,” she says. Sandra believes the solutions-focused approach has also helped to bind people together. “We are all talking the same language. I don’t think that we necessarily use the phrases we learnt within the programme or consciously imagine our ‘future perfect’ every day, but the programme has delivered a common way of working and addressing the issues and has I am sure gone some way to aiding an understanding of one another.”

Developing Internal Coaches

There was a significant shift during the third phase of the programme, which involved introducing a further twelve managers to solutions-focused coaching. This time, internal JLIS coaches conducted the one-to-one coaching, rather than professional coaches from The Solutions Focus (TSF). Managers who had previously taken part in the programme coached, giving the business increasing ownership. A professional coach from TSF supervised and supported, with the aim of them eventually become self-sufficient internal ‘experts’ who could themselves support and develop others.

JLIS plans to start the fourth phase of the programme next year. This will involve

continuing to develop internal coaching capability and gradually rolling the programme out to all 50 managers in the broader management team. Building on the coaching programme, the organisation has also recently launched a solutions-focused 360-degree feedback programme to support the development of the management team.

Measuring the Impact

**MD Tim Grier says
... change has
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There is no doubt that the solutions-focused coaching programme has had a significant and long-lasting impact within JLIS. MD Tim Grier says this change has happened on a number of levels. Firstly, there has been a sizeable and noticeable change to the overall atmosphere within the business.

"The facilities management business is tough and it's easy to focus on what's going wrong, but just because we don't get a pat on the back from the client, we can still notice what we are doing well and celebrate the successes," he says. "It has been challenging, as giving compliments was not our natural way of doing things - and it has taken some getting used to for people to talk about their own successes openly and to compliment others. The coaching programme has, however, helped us evolve away from an obsession with what's gone wrong - and it is good to have a reminder that actually, the vast majority of things do go well."

Grier adds that the coaching programme has also made a significant contribution to the growth of individuals and to the management team." *People,*" he says, *"are practising the techniques in their day-to-day work, whether they are in a coaching situation or not."* The solutions-focused coaching programme is, quite literally, enabling the organisation to change its culture in an emergent fashion, one conversation at a time.

"People are more focused and we've seen greater co-operation because the people who have been coached by our directors and senior managers now have better capabilities and a better understanding of what we're trying to achieve," he explains. "Now, when we have a management meeting, we start off by talking about successes and achievements rather than what we haven't done well. This positive approach is much more motivating and encouraging."

**significant savings
through more
productive working
practices**

Although the company has not formally evaluated direct, bottom-line benefits, it estimates it has made significant savings through more productive working practices – and as a result is committed to continued investment in the programme.

"The programme has made a major contribution to JLIS's overall aim of having excellent people delivering things in a consistent way," says Grier. "The coaching is part of an evolution of our culture, based on improvement, development and success and it has played a key role in our successful and

continued growth.”

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About the author

Janine Waldman, MSc FCIPD, has 18 years' experience in coaching, training, consultancy and organisational development, having held senior HR positions in the UK and New Zealand before becoming co-director of coaching and change consultancy The Solutions Focus. She works with organisations to bring about positive change and to implement constructive and resourceful ways of working. Recent projects include developing a coaching culture at John Laing Integrated Services, up-skilling Fairness at Work Advisors at Northamptonshire Police and a two-year project with Reading Borough Council introducing solutions-focused working. Janine is co-author of "Positively Speaking: The Art of Constructive Conversations with a Solutions Focus"

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