

Solution-focused Coaching: Simply Effective

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John is a 35-year-old project manager who was offered external coaching. John performed generally well but was said to communicate rather bluntly. The goal of the coaching was to help John improve his communication skills, to communicate more tactful and aware. John and his coach tried to find situations in which John had already done this. Together, they explored these situations and identified which behaviors of John helped to make his communication more effective. Doing this they identified some things that worked really well (taking some time before responding, asking other peoples help, etc.). In the following few weeks John started to apply these solutions consciously. It worked fine. John even applied his new skills in applying for a new job within his organization. He got the job.

Nowadays many managers and employees are assiduously looking for ways to lessen their problems or to increase their work pleasure. The market for external coaching is extensive and growing. Maybe you have considered coaching yourself too. What would you pay attention to when looking for a coach? What form of coaching would suit you? What qualifications should your coach have? An experienced person from your own field of expertise? A person with extensive industry familiarity? An experienced ex-manager? A psychologist? A psychologist with management-experience? A psychotherapist? A neuro-linguistic programmer? Someone of whom you can tell that s/he is a well-balanced person? Someone of whom you know s/he has overcome the very problems you are struggling with? A New Age coach? An enneagram specialist? A healer? A paragnost? An astrologer? You have lots of options if you want a coach.....

Solution- focused coaching

Although there seem to be rather too many than too few types of coaches available we want to bring a new kind of coaching under your attention: solution-focused coaching. The reason for this is that this way of working enables coaching's to be brief, effective and respectful. Originally from the world of therapy, solution-focused coaching is now gaining popularity in the world of work rapidly. The basic assumption of solution-focused coaching is that for each coachee specific individualized solutions for problems work best and that any person is competent to solve his or her own problems. These solutions emerge by asking useful questions by the coach. How does this work? We would like to start with a description of two things that usually do not happen in solution-focused coaching: analysing problem causes and prescribing generic solutions.

No problem analysis and diagnosis

The solution focused approach finds it more useful to focus attention directly on building solutions for problems than on analyzing causes of problems and making a diagnosis. Although diagnosing problems often works with technical and medical problems, it hardly ever works with problems in organizations. Focusing on what's wrong usually drains people's energy, makes them feel guilty and distracts them from focusing on their goals.

No theory-based generic solutions

Another thing a solution-focused coach hardly ever does is using theories and expert knowledge. As a rule, the

coach does not present generic theory-based solutions. A core assumption of solution-focused coaching is that what works best is to help the coachee find solutions that fit his or her unique circumstances. This inductive way of working leads to individualized solutions that are really owned by the coachee.

Doing what works!

But what is this solution-focus then, you might wonder. In essence it comes down to:

1. Acknowledging problems: first of all acknowledge the problem you might have. In what sense is it a problem? How does it bother you?
2. Defining your preferred future: specify how you would like things to be
3. Identifying solutions: identify what helps you make progress in that desired direction (find out what works)
4. Amplifying solutions: if something works, do MORE of it
5. If you notice something does not work, stop doing it and do something ELSE

Tools of the solution-focused coach
Some specific tools are often used to enable the process of solution building.

1. The miracle question: defining the preferred future
An important tool of the solution-focused coach is the so-called miracle question. This question asks the coachee to describe detailedly how his situation would be if a miracle had happened and the problems he now faces had been solved. Inviting the client to visualize his life when the problem no longer exists has a surprisingly strong effect. It gives hope to a better future and starts a positive chain reaction.

2. Positive exceptions: the key to finding solutions
The interesting thing with problems is that they are not continuously present. For instance, imagine a project manager who often misses deadlines. There will have been occasions when he has met (a) deadline(s). There are always exceptions to the problem, situations in which the problem is not happening, or to a lesser extent than usually. These positive exceptions usually form the key to solving the problem. What behavior and circumstances make the problem disappear (or partly disappear) in those instances? An example: if an employee finds it hard to keep working due to stress, we don't focus on what he no longer can do but on what he still can do and how he does it and how he has managed to cope effectively with stress in the past.

Scales: visualizing progress

The coach asks the coachee to imagine a scale from 0 to 10. The 10 stands for the situation in which the coachee has fully achieved his goals; the 0 stands for the situation in which the problem happens at its worst. The coach asks the coachee where s/he is now on that scale and what this point at the scales means to him/her. Next, the coach asks the client what the situation would look like on the next step of the scale. The focus is on visualizing things being a little better. Step by step progress is being made. Taking small steps is essential. Small steps require only minimal effort but their effects can be large because they often unexpectedly start off a chain of positive events.

Compliments: pointers of resources

A solution-focused coach frequently compliments the coachee, both directly and indirectly. A direct compliment

might be: 'I think you handled that fantastically!' An example of an indirect compliment is: 'how did you manage to accomplish such a difficult task?' Indirect compliments are as it were invitations to the client to compliment himself on what he has achieved, knowing this will help the client to be even more successful in dealing with the problem. Compliments are pointers of resources and solutions. They are intended to point to the fact that the coachee has handled a challenging situation well and they help coach and coachee to explore such as situation further. Thus they help the coachee identify what works.

Respect and collaboration

Solution-focused coaching is highly respectful and collaborative. The coachee directs the process. The coachee's perspective, beliefs and goals are fully respected and acknowledged in the coaching process. The coach doesn't try to change the client but uses the beliefs and goals that the client views as helpful. The approach is non-confrontational and non-judgmental. The coach is really curious and interested in the in the solutions of the coachee and truly not-knowing what is best for some one else. When a coachee is no longer communicating cooperatively, the coach does not see this as resistance to change. Rather, he uses this as a signal that his interventions are in some way ineffective and that he must adjust to the coachee's perspective again.

Brief; not a primary goal, but a nice side-effect

Solution-focused coaching can often be brief. One reason for this is that the coaching is very much focused on achieving specific goals. A second reason is that most clients pick up this simple (but not easy) way of dealing with problems quite fast. Having dealt with one problem, lots of clients are able to deal with other problems by approaching them the same way. Solution focused-coaching is gaining popularity rapidly and for a good reason: it works!