

The 4 Step Method of Solution-Focused Management

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Sandra is Edward's manager, and she finds him difficult to manage. Edward is usually overly critical and seems to care more for his clients than for the company for which he works or his manager's goals. Sandra genuinely tries her best to see things from Edward's perspective and to take his wishes into account, but with little effect. Now the company has a new policy, which means concentrating on the core activities and as a consequence certain services will no longer be delivered. Edward explodes, saying: 'I will not carry out this stupid decision! My client is very pleased with the service and I will continue to offer it!' Sandra feels very angry and does not know how to respond.

What has solution-focused thinking got to offer to managers? It is very useful in coaching and consultancy but also managers can benefit from it. The Four Step Method helps managers to manage successfully. The Four Step Method is the most compact way in which we can describe solution-focused thinking.

The Four Step Method of Solution Focused Management When encountering problems the solution focused manager carefully answers the following questions:

1. Acknowledging problems: Acknowledge the problem without paying attention to the causes of the problem. What is the essence of the problem and how does it hinder you? How is it a problem to you?
2. Describing Success: What do you want instead of the problem? What kind of success are you looking for? How will you know that the success happens? What will be better then? How will you be able to change your own behaviour when the success happens?
3. Identify and analyse positive exceptions: When has the success happened already in the past, if only a little bit? Describe the situation; what was different? What caused this success to happen? What was your contribution to this success? How did you do this?
4. Take a small step forward: Think about your answers in step three for awhile. Which aspects of the positive exceptions could you use again? Think about a small step forward, which you could take tomorrow.

Continuation: If it goes well, repeat the steps 2, 3 and 4. If things do not improve, go back to step 1 and then go through with step 2, 3 and 4.

Going through the steps yourself

Sandra acknowledges that she has a problem herself and she goes through the four steps for herself.

Step 1. Acknowledge problems: she discovers what bothers her most. It's Edward non-constructive attitude, which makes it difficult for her to trust him. Sandra realises that she finds it hard to treat Edward like a valuable member of the team.

Step 2, Describe the success: Sandra thinks about what she wants to achieve. She wants Edward to be a constructive member of the team. She will notice that this success happens when Edward keeps his promises and when she finds herself taking him seriously.

Step 3, Identify and analyse positive exceptions: Sandra tries to find a situation in the past in which Edward already showed himself as a more constructive team member. She remembers a meeting in which Edward behaved constructively. She analyses what was different and remembers that Edward wanted to cancel the meeting at first, because he did not find it very important or useful, but that she had been really firm with him because she was suddenly fed up with his behaviour. She had said: "I expect you to be there and to behave like a co-operative team member!" To her big surprise the meeting went smoothly, Edward attended the meeting and behaved cooperatively even cheerfully.

Step 4, Take a small step forward: Sandra thinks that she could try this direct approach with Edward once more. She approaches him and says: "I understand you don't approve of the company policy, but I expect you to comply with it with loyalty!" Edward is quiet for awhile. Then he says: "OK, that's very clear" And then the conversation takes a turn. Edward apologises for his previous behaviour and says that he will comply with the company policy, but he admits that he does not know how to do it. He asks Sandra for her help. Helping an employee using the four steps.

Sandra decides to help Edward, using the four steps

Step 1, Acknowledge problems: she asks Edward what his problem is. He explains that he fears the response of his client, who is very demanding. He is concerned that the client will not accept the company's policy not to deliver the service any longer. When Sandra asks Edward how this is a problem to him, he says that he finds it really hard to balance the needs of the client with the needs of his team. He doesn't take a lot of pleasure in his work any longer.

Step 2, Describe success: Sandra says she understands how hard this is for him. She acknowledges that it is important to Edward to change the situation. Consequently, she asks him what a good balance between the clients needs and the team needs would look like to him. Edward says that he will draw boundaries towards his clients while at the same time remain to be client focused. Sandra then asks how this would help Edward. He says that he would enjoy his work more if he would achieve this success. He also says it would help him to be more friendly to his colleagues. He would feel more part of the team.

Step 3, Identify and analyse positive exceptions: Sandra says: "That sounds good to me! Has there ever been a situation that was a bit like the success you just described?" Edward thinks awhile.... Then he starts to smile. He says that he once had to announce a price increase. He told his client right from the start and he responded annoyed. Edward thought the client would break off the relationship and was so tense that he did not know what to say. But when Edward kept still, the client said something that surprised Edward very much. The client said he wanted to maintain the business relationship because he was very happy with my service level and would therefore put up with the price increase. Then Edward knew how to respond again. I thanked him for his appreciation and then continued the conversation with his client.

Step 4, Take a small step: Sandra responds: "That sounds great! How could this be useful in your current situation?" Edward answers: "I am just going to tell him about the company policy! If he gets angry, I will let him get it off his chest until he says something I can respond to positively. That is definitely worth trying! Thanks for your help!"

And now it is up to you! Try the four steps of solution focused management yourself! Before you start applying the four steps think carefully about whom is the problem owner. Are you having a problem with an employee or do you

want to help an employee with a problem he has got? As becomes clear in this true story of Sandra and Edward, it is very important to make that distinction. When you try the method, we would appreciate to hear from you!