

The Solution-focused Approach to Coaching

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INTRODUCTION

All forms of coaching, in one way or another, seek to develop solutions to the issues brought forward by the client. What then is unique about solution-focused coaching? How does it differ from other forms of coaching? This chapter outlines the background and basic tenets of the solution-focused (SF) approach, and examines some core assumptions and processes underpinning it as a methodology for change.

The SF approach to coaching places primary emphasis on assisting the client to define a desired future state and to construct a pathway in both thinking and action that assists the client in achieving that state. It contrasts with other approaches by eschewing much of the problem state definition seen in other traditions. In so doing, the SF approach is situated squarely in a constructivist epistemology – maintaining that events and their meanings are actively constructed in dialogue rather than simply given to us in experience (O’Connell, 1998).

According to SF theorists, the act of spending large amounts of time and effort in articulating a strong definition of the client’s problem, deconstructing the chain of cause and effect that led to the current state of affairs, or apportioning blame, is often a waste of time and energy. Indeed, it is often positively counterproductive (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Knowing how a problem arose does not necessarily tell one how to fix it. Furthermore, proponents of the SF approach suggest that the very act of articulating a causal explanation may serve to constrain the coach and coachee into a frame of reference that limits potential solutions rather than uncovers them

(de Shazer, 1994). Hence, the primary emphasis in SF coaching is on defining the desired solution state and potential pathways to get there (Jackson & McKergow, 2007).

History of the solution-focused approach

Like many of the recognized approaches to coaching, the SF approach has its roots in therapy. The foundational work in brief therapy, out of which the SF approach arose, was conducted by Gregory Bateson, John Wicklund, and others at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, in the 1960s (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). The solution-focused approach as we have come to know it today was first articulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Centre, in Milwaukee Wisconsin, USA. Since then, considerable work has been undertaken in articulating and developing the main tenets of the approach by a host of authors, both at the Brief Family Therapy Centre and at a range of locations around the world (O'Connell, 1998).

According to Berg and Szabo (2005), therapists and researchers at these centres had become dissatisfied with the traditional therapeutic approach, finding that the more clients talked about their problems the more entrenched they would get. Rather than analysing problems, developing diagnoses, uncovering root causes, and prescribing treatment plans based on *a priori* theoretical models of the issue, they began to simply ask questions that focused their clients' attention on building solutions. The key question in developing the approach was 'what works for the client?'

They found that a focus on solution talk, strengths and resources, rather than problem talk, was very effective for a large range of clients. Indeed, there is a growing body of research that shows that solution-focused therapy can be effective for a wide array of problems, including couple counselling (Murray & Murray Jr, 2004), child and adolescent counselling (Corcoran & Stephenson, 2000; Lethem, 2002) and depression (Dahl, Bathel, & Carreon, 2000). There is also research that supports the use of solution-focused coaching in personal coaching (Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007; Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006; Spence & Grant, 2007), workplace coaching (Barrett, 2004).

Basic assumptions

The SF approach to coaching is distinguished from approaches based on more traditional models of psychological change (e.g. cognitive behavioural and psychodynamic traditions) by two fundamental philosophical and theoretical assumptions.

First, as mentioned above, the SF approach adheres to a constructionist philosophy. It holds that it is the way in which the client (and coach) think and talk about events that constructs those events as problematic. The problem is not something given in reality, but constructed in the discourse between the client and others in the client's world.

Second, the solution-focused approach sees the client as fundamentally capable of solving their problem. That is to say, they already have all they need to create the solution state (Berg & Szabo, 2005; de Shazer, 1988). This conceptualization of the client sees the person as whole and resource-full, rather than as dysfunctional and needy. When taken together these assumptions lead to several key tenets of solution-focused approaches (O'Connell, 1998).

1. **Use of a non-pathological interpretive framework:** Problems are not indications of pathology or dysfunction. Rather they indicate a need to try different perspectives or behaviours.
2. **Client-based expertise:** The idea is that the client rather than the coach is the expert in their own life.
3. **Coaching is about facilitating solution construction:** The coach primarily facilitates the construction of solutions rather than trying to understand the aetiology of the problem.
4. **Focus on client resources:** The coach helps the client recognize and utilize existing resources.
5. **Clear, specific and personalized goal setting:** To assist the client in attaining their preferred future, the articulation of that future state should be clear and behaviourally detailed. Because problems and solutions are constructed by the client, coaching interventions should be tailored to each client.
6. **Action-orientation:** There is a fundamental expectation on the coach's part that positive change both can, and will, occur, and that the work of change takes place primarily outside of the coaching session.
7. **Do what works, and stop doing what does not work:** Allied to the commitment to an action orientation is a pragmatic focus on identifying what is working for the client and amplifying this. Similarly, if an attempt at problem resolution is not working, then stop and try something different.
8. **Change can happen in a short period of time:** Because the client is already whole, change does not require fixing the client. This stands in contrast to the assumption that change must be worked on over a long period of time.
9. **Enchantment:** Borrowed from the work of Milton Erickson, SF approaches suggest that the coaching process be designed and conducted in a way that is attractive and engaging for the client.

CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED COACHING

The solution-focused approach was developed as a brief intervention. Brevity here is not about limiting the number or length of sessions. Rather, it reflects an intention to do only that which is necessary for the client to achieve movement forward (Berg & Szabo, 2005). Hence, the goals of SF coaching are often narrower or more limited than goals set in other traditions (Berg and Szabo, 2005). The SF approach does not seek to resolve past injuries, uncover and reduce defence mechanisms, rebuild cognitive schemas, or effect character change. Rather, it seeks to uncover with the client his/her own resourcefulness and bring this to bear in the service of the client's goals.

Once the goals have been identified, the SF practitioner seeks to assist the client in identifying the simplest and easiest path to achieving a result that is satisfactory for the client. For example, a coachee might identify that they would like a better relationship with their spouse. The coach would assist the coachee in identifying what a better relationship might look, sound, and feel like – what sort of behaviours, feelings, thoughts and actions might be present in a better relationship. The coach would then work with the client to identify how much of this desired state needs to be present for the coaching to have been successful and the coachee to feel like they are on the way toward their solution.

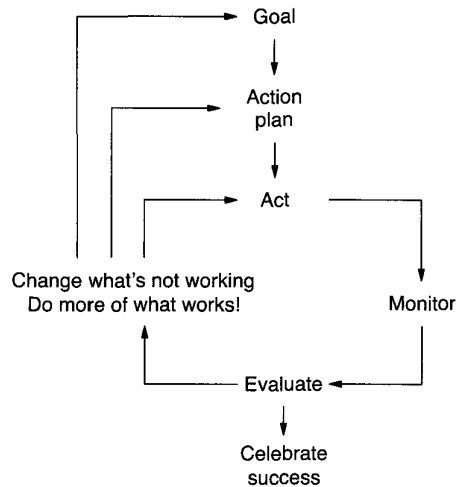


Figure 3.1 The cycle of self-regulation.

Self directed learning

Implicit in the above is the goal of building a capacity for self-directed learning in the coachee. This goal lies at the heart of the solution-focused approach. Self-directed learning seeks to build self-efficacy and self-reliance through the process of discovering personalized solutions to problems, identifying solution steps that work for the individual, assessing effectiveness through feedback, and then altering one's behaviour to maximize the effectiveness of one's attempts to reach the goal. Such a process seeks to elicit a curious, experiential and experimental mindset. Once this learning capacity is activated in service of the client's goal, the expectation of the SF practitioner is that the client will continue to self-regulate and integrate these skills into other aspects of their life.

Self-regulation is thus an important part of the SF approach. Greene and Grant (2003) have graphically represented the process of self-regulation as a simple, iterative cycle of setting a goal, developing an action plan, acting, monitoring, evaluating, and then changing what does not work and doing more of what works (see Figure 3.1). The coach's role is to facilitate the client's journey through this cycle while holding the client's focus on their goal/s.

TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGE IN THE SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH

To enhance and facilitate the development of self-regulatory functioning in the client the SF approach seeks to enhance two types of change – change in the way in which the client views the problem, and the development of behaviours consistent with solution attainment. In other

words, the two main tasks of solution-focused coaching are to ‘change the viewing’ and ‘change the doing’ (O’Hanlon & Beadle, 1996:11).

1. Changing the viewing

Changing the viewing is central to the SF approach. Clients, when they are focused on the problem or on all the reasons why the problem is difficult to solve, are by definition not looking toward the solution or the resources and steps needed to make the solution real. We know from experience and research that what you focus on grows. When we habitually focus our attention two psychological processes come into play – sensitization and amplification (Barsky, 1992).

Sensitization refers to the process whereby we learn to notice, or become sensitive to, a particular class of stimuli. For example, many parents become sensitized to the cry of their own child; or we might start to notice a particular model of car when we are considering purchasing one.

Amplification refers to the perceptual impact of what we notice. As we pay attention to a particular stimulus, it seems to grow in its importance or impact. Common examples include lying in bed listening to a tap drip or a dog bark. The more we attend to the sound the louder it gets. Of course, it is our perception of the sound that changes, not the volume of sound itself.

Changing the viewing shifts the perceptual cycles of sensitization and amplification from problem to solution. The more we become practised at focusing on solutions, the more solutions we notice and the more obvious they become.

Once the solution state has been clearly identified, and goals for coaching have been established, the task then becomes to marshal the resources needed to achieve the chosen goals. The coaching task at this point is to assist the client in identifying any resources the client has that can be brought to bear in the service of the coach’s goal (O’Hanlon & Beadle, 1996).

Solution-focused practitioners have developed dozens of techniques for assisting clients to change the viewing and identify resources. The following techniques are some of the more commonly used.

The Miracle Question The miracle question is paradigmatic of the SF approach (Berg & Szabo, 2005) In the ‘Miracle Question’, in which the coach asks ‘Imagine that you went to bed tonight, and when you woke up the problem had somehow magically disappeared, and the solution was present ... but you didn’t know that the solution had arrived ... what is the first thing that you’d notice that would tell you that the solution was present?’

Scaling Scaling is perhaps one of the most versatile of the solution-focused techniques. It can be used to: (i) identify where the client currently perceives themselves to be in relation to their goal – ‘on a scale of 1 to 10 with ten representing the complete solution, and one representing the problem at its worst, where would you say you are now?’; (ii) clarify fuzzy goals – ‘What does an 8 look like, how would you know you were at an 8?’; (iii) identify progress made so

far – ‘so how come you are at a 4 now – what did you do to get that far?’; (iv) articulate small steps toward the goal – ‘so what would be different if you were at a 5, or even a 4 ½?’.

Highlighting resources The old cliché that every problem contains the seeds of its solution has become a cliché precisely because it has a good deal of truth in it. In this technique the coach listens for hidden and unacknowledged resources, as for example:

Client: ‘The tender was not successful and all the work I put in was completely wasted.’

Coach: ‘Sounds disappointing, but was it a complete waste – what did you learn from the experience?’

Reframing Reframing is another set of central solution-focused tools. In this set of techniques the coach seeks to reframe the client’s statements in a way that opens up possibilities and focuses the client on resources. We often use the following example in workshops.

- Reframing using compliments:

Client: ‘It’s far too expensive.’

Coach: ‘It’s great that you are concerned about keeping on budget. How can we make it more affordable?’

- Reframing that highlights exceptions:

Client: ‘I really hate my work.’

Coach: ‘It sounds very unpleasant ... tell me, which parts of your job are less unpleasant for you?’

- Reframing that clarifies goals:

Client: ‘I really want to improve my leadership skills.’

Coach: ‘So, what does good leadership mean to you?’

- Reframing problems to solutions:

Client: ‘I feel completely lost.’

Coach: ‘So, you’d like to get back a sense of direction and control?’

2. Changing the doing

Changing the viewing is not enough. If the coaching conversation is to be more than an interesting exercise in how we perceive the world, it must result in action. Hence the second major task of SF coaching is to ‘change the doing’ (O’Hanlon & Beadle, 1996: 11). In this part of the coaching process, the task is to identify patterns of behaviour that support goal attainment, and to change any patterns of behaviour that interfere with goal attainment. This may involve mapping the behavioural sequences present when the problem exists and at times when the solution or part of it is present (O’Hanlon & Beadle, 1996). The client and coach then identify helpful patterns that can be replicated, and these are practised in homework tasks.

Some techniques that can be useful in changing the doing are:

- (1) recognizing possibilities by turning presenting problems into springboards for solution construction (Jackson & McKergow, 2007)
- (2) asking ‘how’ questions instead of ‘why’ questions

- (3) generating client-centred multiple options (O'Hanlon & Beadle, 1996)
- (4) Using small specific achievable action steps.

An experimental mindset is preferred when it comes to changing the doing. The SF approach makes no prediction about what should be done. Rather, the coach and coachee work together to discover a pathway to success that works for the client, in their context. Hence, identifying what has worked in the past and experimenting with new possibilities are both important. This is consistent with a scientist practitioner model of coaching practice (Cavanagh & Grant, 2006).

The philosophical stance which holds that the client is not broken also encourages the solution-focused coach to change as little as possible (de Shazer, 2005). The old adage 'if it ain't broken, don't fix it' takes the status of core principle in SF coaching (Greene & Grant, 2003). Hence small steps and active engagement in the feedback and evaluation process are important.

THE SOLUTION-FOCUSED COACHING ENGAGEMENT

From the client's perspective, the SF approach is often an attractive and refreshingly strengths-based intervention (Chou, 2007). By avoiding delving deeply into an examination of the client's problems, or searching for aetiological explanations in the client's psychological profile, clients are enabled to experience themselves as healthy and capable, rather than as unhealthy or disabled.

The principal challenge for the coach is taking on the mindset needed for effective solution-focused coaching. Do we really believe in the essential wholeness of the client? Holding the client in this way is not always easy, but it is vital to the solution-focused enterprise – the quality of the working alliance significantly contributes to success (Horvath & Symonds, 1991).

The solution-focused mindset is a challenge for clients too. Some clients are able to clearly articulate exactly what they want to achieve through the coaching. They seem to fall naturally into solution talk. Other clients will more naturally move into problem talk and feel the need to explain the problem in detail. The coach's task is to help the client shift from a problem-focused to a solution-focused mindset as quickly as possible. Sometimes this shift occurs very quickly. However, with heavily problem-saturated clients the coach needs to exercise patience and sensitivity. It is important to meet such clients where they are – and gradually to help shift the conversation toward a more solution-focused frame. Indeed, some clients take a number of sessions before they can start to adopt an SF approach to their difficulties. Nevertheless, failure to reflect empathically the client's experience is likely to lead to a break in rapport which must be mended as the coaching conversation continues.

Many clients oscillate between problem talk and solutions talk, seemingly moving into a positive solution-focused mode only to fall back into the problem moments later. This kind of oscillation can be frustrating for the inexperienced coach wanting to deliver a solution. Here it

is important to trust the process and allow the client to explore their thinking while watching in their own time for the seeds of solutions as they emerge. The taking of a 'not the expert' position allows the coach to relax and observe this unfolding creative process. It is the ability to sit with the uncertainty and ambiguity of the coaching process that differentiates the really good coach from the novice.

As the coaching conversation unfolds, the coach is working with the client to build up a picture of their preferred future through reflection and reframing. Scaling can be used to help the client judge their progress in relation to specific goals. As Grant (2006: 85) states: 'Scaling is nearly always an opportunity for the coach to give a compliment. Even if the clients say that they are at a 3 on a 10-point scale, the coach can respond – 'well done – one third of the way there already'.

Like many of the SF techniques, the giving of compliments and reframing must be done from a position of genuine positive regard and desire to really understand and move toward the client's goals. Without this fundamentally respectful stance, SF techniques can appear as superficial and manipulative.

Some solution-focused authors suggest that a hallmark of the SF approach is the use of the miracle question, typically delivered in the first session (de Shazer 1988; O'Connell, 1998). However, we have found that it is often best to ask this question, once the client is ready to shift from an exploratory or deliberative mindset to an implementational mindset (Bayer & Gollwitzer, 2005; Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2002). The deliberative mindset is characterized by a careful exploring of the pros and cons of potential goals and actions (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and is therefore more likely to produce abstract problem-focused responses to the miracle question. The implementational mindset, on the other hand, is focused on identifying means to change, and is therefore more behaviourally focused and detailed (Bayer & Gollwitzer, 2005). To ask the miracle question while the client is still exploring the problem can result in client confusion, a lack of engagement, and even anger or resentment.

For some clients, the wording of the miracle question can be problematic. They experience talk of miracles as polyanna-ish and silly. For such clients the coach can ask a more concrete variation of the miracle question – such as the Two Videos Question. Here the coach asks the client to imagine two videos playing. One video shows the problem as it is being enacted. The other video shows the preferred outcome being enacted. The client's role is to simply describe the difference between the two.

These questions help the client describe their situation and the solution in concrete behavioural, emotional, and relational terms – i.e. 'who is doing what, how and with whom and what impact does that have?' By describing the solution in this way, both the coach and client are usually able to identify do-able actions that will lead toward the goal.

The miracle question and its variants also help to build the client's capacity for mindfulness. These questions require the client to emotionally disengage from the problem – to step out of the problem, and take a metacognitive position. This metacognitive distance helps to make visible a solution that cannot be seen when we are 'in' the problem. One changes the viewing to change the doing!

Ending the coaching engagement

As mentioned above, the SF approach is designed to minimize intervention. For this reason, contracting for particular numbers of sessions is not entirely consistent with SF coaching. While the coach might ask at the beginning of the engagement about the client's expectation of the number of sessions needed, each session in the solution-focused model is complete in itself (Berg & Szabo, 2005; O'Connell, 1998). Terminating the coaching engagement occurs when the client has met their goal, or feels satisfied that they can move toward it without the coach. Hence, SF coaching typically ends each session with a real question as to whether another session is needed. 'Do we need to meet again, or do you feel like you have done what you needed to do?'

APPLICATIONS OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED COACHING

The SF approach is a methodology that is applicable in a wide range of coaching settings. Because it seeks to work with the client's goals, and begins with the client's perspective, the application across settings is very similar. Nevertheless, it is worth noting some differences in emphasis found in different settings.

Skills and performance coaching

The psychological literature distinguishes between two types of development – horizontal development, or assimilation, and vertical development or accommodation. Horizontal development occurs when a person is able to assimilate new information or new practices into their current worldview. Skills and performance coaching would typically fall into this category of development. In skills and performance coaching, the task is to focus on the development and application of specific knowledge skills and abilities in order to enhance workplace performance or achieve specific organizational targets.

This focus on organizational goals and needs adds some complexity to solution-focused coaching. Often there is congruence between what the organization wants from the coachee and what the coachee wants from coaching. In such cases goal setting within coaching is rather straightforward. However, when there is a mismatch between the coachee's perceived needs and the organization's requirements, then goal clarification becomes critical.

An SF approach to this conundrum is to treat this apparent dilemma as a platform for more solutions (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). For example the coach might bring the issue into the foreground as follows: 'I notice that you would like to achieve X, and at the same time, the organization is requiring that we work toward Y. I wonder what this means for the coaching? Is it possible for us to work toward both targets together, or is one more important for you? Perhaps there are other solutions possible?'

Skills and performance coaching often requires the use of organizational metrics such as 360-degree feedback and other data driven means of assessing performance. Often these metrics lead to a focus on what is missing or undone, rather than what is good or strong about the client's performance. The challenge for the solution-focused coach is to help the client see measurement as feedback in service of their goals. Reframing of feedback and metrics to identify progress and resources is important here.

Developmental coaching

The term developmental coaching has two meanings in the literature. The first refers to holistic development of the client aimed at greater self-actualization and authenticity. The second meaning refers to the notion of vertical development, or accommodation. This type of development requires the enlarging of one's meaning-making to accommodate new goals and practices. In other words, it is the type of development needed when a person's current way of responding to the world needs to change in order to meet the new challenges they are facing (e.g. Kegan, 1994). In both meanings developmental coaching and the solution-focused approach are suited to each other.

There is, however, an inherent tension in the developmental enterprise. The goal of constructing developmental solutions often requires the coach to challenge, at least implicitly, the current worldview of the coachee. For example, let us say a coachee has a goal of dealing with team conflict more effectively, and they are considering an action plan that involves avoiding an aggressive team member. The solution-focused coach might enquire into, and affirm, the client's positive intent, and ask the client to consider any possible unforeseen consequences of their course of action (Berg & Szabo, 2005). Coaching might then consider other options for viewing and acting in the situation that might minimize any potential unintended consequences.

Executive and leadership coaching

Executive and leadership coaching also holds some particular challenges for the solution-focused coach. Typically, executive coaching involves a mix of skills, performance, and development coaching, and generally proceeds as does most SF coaching. Unlike other areas of SF practice, executive coaching often involves the identification of a coherent personalized model of leadership and the competencies that support it.

A second area of difference is that leaders and executives often present in coaching with goals that need others to change behaviour. However, a basic assumption in the SF approach is that change is not something we can determine for others. When a client has a strong need to change another person's behaviour, the SF approach calls for questioning that assists the client in making their view of the situation explicit and tangible, exploring alternate views, and

identifying what the client can do to influence self-directed change in the other person, rather than repeating past unhelpful strategies like simply insisting that the other person change.

As in all SF coaching, clear identification of the desired outcome is important. Similarly, identifying positive intentions and providing support for trying new ways of seeing and dealing with the situation are likely to be useful. The coach might use a number of techniques to assist the client to focus on what is do-able and what works. For example, the coach might ask the client to recall conversations that seemed to be effective in helping the target person modify their behaviour, or enquire with the client as to what might be going on for the target person, and how the client might check this out. Encouraging the client to experiment with different types of change conversations with the target person often leads to successful outcomes.

EVALUATING THE APPROACH: AGENCY, CAUSATION AND EMERGENCE

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the solution-focused coach is to let go of causal problem-focused explanations as a foundation of practice. Given that most of us have had a life-long education based on deterministic principles and scientific method, this is not always an easy task.

The lack of causal reasoning in the SF approach has led to claims that it is a superficial intervention (e.g. Ellis, 1997). Some authors have suggested that for coaching to be truly effective, a 'deeper' approach is necessary (e.g. Berglas, 2002; Kilburg, 2004). The idea that an approach is superficial or deep is interesting. In our experience, the extended discussion of causes can take place with little or no positive change in the person's sense of self, worldview or behaviour. In what sense then is such an approach deemed to be 'deep'? Conversely, the construction of a preferred future, and the identification of hitherto untapped personal resources can have profound impacts on the person's worldview and sense of self, and can issue in significant behavioural change.

Of course, there are times when the solution-focused approach is not appropriate. Some clients may have causal stories about their situation which form a central and protected part of their worldview. Similarly, when clients have deeply felt needs to explore aetiology, attempting then to shoe-horn them into a methodology that feels incongruent is likely to be counterproductive. Our experience suggests that such clients will often respond favourably to a well-presented rationale for the SF approach. However, if they do not, then referral, or use of an alternative methodology is indicated. To force a solution-focused perspective onto an unwilling client runs counter to the core principle of respecting the client.

The solution-focused approach has sometimes been called a theory-free methodology. Diagnostic explanations run counter to the idea that the client is the expert in their lives and the solution is within them awaiting discovery. The coach does not need any expert knowledge about the client's problems, beyond asking the right questions to unlock the client's solutions (e.g. de Shazer, 1988). However, this cannot truly be the case. In order for the coach to ask the

right questions, the coach must have at least an implicit theory about the issue, and a theory about what kind of question will best help the client articulate a solution. If the coach really had no expert knowledge or skills, or no theory about how best to help the client, then it is hard to understand why the client would employ the coach in the first place (see Held, 1996 for a detailed discussion of these issues).

Is the coach then the real expert in coaching? Complexity theory teaches us that outcomes are an emergent property of the system, and not the sole responsibility of any single part of the system (Lewin, 1993). As a complex adaptive system, the outcome of the coaching engagement emerges from the complex interaction of the coach *and* client together (Cavanagh, 2006). In other words, the solution is radically co-created by both client and coach.

When viewed from this perspective, expert-centric views of coaching which suggest that the coach ‘adds value’ either by providing expert knowledge, or by their ability to view the client’s system from a more objective perspective, are fundamentally flawed. Similarly, overly simplistic understandings which suggest that the client is the ‘expert’ in the coaching session are also distorted.

The idea that the solution lies within the client, and the coach’s role is merely to facilitate the client in discovering what they already have within them, is a useful metaphor for helping coaches develop an attitude of curiosity and facilitation. The SF project requires the coach to take the beginner’s mind. The catch cry ‘Ask, don’t tell’ is often used to encourage this attitude. Yet experience shows that sometimes no matter how long we ask, the solution does not emerge, because it is not ‘in’ the client.

Our experience as coaches, and as coach educators, suggests that both the simplistic client-centric approach and the expert-centric approach are often more about managing the coach’s anxiety and encouraging an open mindset in the coach, than that they are reflective of what actually happens in effective coaching sessions.

Valuing the tensions

There is an inherent important tension between the different expert knowledge bases brought to the session by the coach and client. The creativity of the SF approach relies on this tension; for it is out of the interaction between the two understandings that creative solutions are born. Hence, tension should not only be valued, but also actively sought and nurtured and, where necessary, managed (Stacey, 2000). Rush to closure on this tension stifles creativity. Too much tension between the understandings brought by coach and client is also counterproductive, and usually indicates one or other of the parties have stopped being open to alternate views.

Solution-focused coaches do spend a lot of time asking. But the questions they ask are not atheoretical. Rather, they are informed by implicit and explicit hypotheses about what is going on for the client. Similarly, effective coaches often do tell. They educate their clients. They share their mental models, and direct their clients’ attention toward solutions. Good coaches can and do allow their domain specific knowledge to come into play, but they do so in such a way as it becomes a resource in service of the client’s goal. In other words, their questions remain genuinely curious, and their telling respectful and timely.

FURTHER READING

- Greene, J., & Grant, A.M. (2003). *Solution-focused coaching: Managing people in a complex world*. London: Momentum Press. (An easy-to-read primer on solution-focused coaching and management which cites relevant research and is illustrated throughout with real-life case studies.)
- O'Hanlon, B., & Beadle, S. (1999). *A guide to possibility land: Fifty-one methods for doing respectful brief therapy*. London: Norton & Co. (While written with therapeutic cases in mind, this little book is a gold mine of solution-focused methods. An excellent resource that is easily translated to fit the coaching context.)
- Berg, I., & Szabo, P. (2005). *Brief coaching for lasting solutions*. London: Norton & Co. (An excellent and practical overview from some of the pioneers of the solution-focused approach. The authors describe a range of techniques in detail with engaging case studies and examples.)

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