Improve Collaboration With Solution Focus

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If you need to encourage collaboration in an under performing team and enhance energy, consider a Solution Focus approach. Let me explain.

Introduction

Richard is a Finance Director in a Government organisation. He heads a group of Finance Managers who work in different departments but have many shared goals. Richard's predicament is that the group is not working together effectively.

There has been continual change over the last two years, people are tackling new roles due to an organisational restructuring and they have been dealing with the introduction of a new system that is helping to reengineer organisational processes. There are interpersonal conflicts, people are tired of change and frustrated.

The group has agreed to hold a workshop to analyse the team's working style, discuss the issues, identify the causes and develop an action plan to resolve them.

Is this scenario familiar to you?

Richard contacted Yes! And to ask if we might facilitate the workshop.

We clarified the background and listened to what the group wanted to do during the workshop. The group's approach is a familiar one but one that can lead to some negative consequences:

- Spending time identifying the issues and root causes can be demoralising

- Interpersonal conflict can arise as "causes" are debated

- Time spent debating causes reduces the time available to discuss solutions

You might suggest that unless you know the cause, you cannot identify the solution. This is a valid point where there is a definitive cause for a problem [e.g. a component failed and the aircraft crashed], however, in a team situation, the "cause" will often vary depending on the context and who is analysing the problem.

As an alternative to the team's problem centred approach, we suggested using "Solution Focus" (SF).

What is Solution Focus?

Imagine you have just had some bad news. You focus on this and the other small things that have gone wrong recently and feel utterly miserable. That was me one day.

In the school playground half an hour later I sat waiting for my son, still feeling miserable, when a small boy came up to me. "I really enjoyed Andrew's birthday party," he said.

"Really?" I responded, thinking back to my son's recent party in a bakery. "What did you enjoy the most?" "Baking the cake," he said without hesitation. "What did you enjoy the most?" I thought for a second, "Having a cup of coffee upstairs in the quiet," I smiled and felt good as I remembered it.

Josh skipped away, not realising he had used a tool from Solution Focused Brief Therapy, (a "counter" in Solutions Focus terms), by having me consider a time when I felt positive and good, making me feel more constructive. I went home in a much better frame of mind.

Background in Therapy

Business people have developed Solution Focus from a therapeutic counselling approach that focuses on what the client wants [i.e. the solution] and what is working well in their life, rather than focusing on their problem and weaknesses. Therapists have found that this unconventional approach gives the client a more positive outlook, encourages them to take small steps to achieve change and takes less time to achieve a positive outcome than conventional therapy.

Applying to Business

People have brought this approach in to business life and commercial and public organisations around the world are using it successfully to effect change.

Think of an organisational situation you want to change. Typically you might define this as a problem and spend much time and effort considering times when the problem is present. However, your time is a valuable resource so it might be more productive to think about when the problem isn't present.

Focusing on the problem informs you about what is happening when the problem is present, but not when things are going well! Mark McKergow and Paul Z. Jackson, in their very readable book "Solutions Focus", equate this to you going to the supermarket with a shopping list that says, "Don't buy eggs, don't buy milk, don't buy bread", instead of a list that says, "Buy coffee, milk and doughnuts."

What if, instead of spending time gathering information about what we don't want, we spend time focusing on what we do want and how we achieve this?

Concentrating on the strengths we have and not our weaknesses. This is the key to the Solutions Focus approach that we suggested to Richard and he readily agreed for us to use it.

We had less than four hours for the workshop, however our experience with Solutions Focus has shown us that a group can use it to achieve much in a short time.
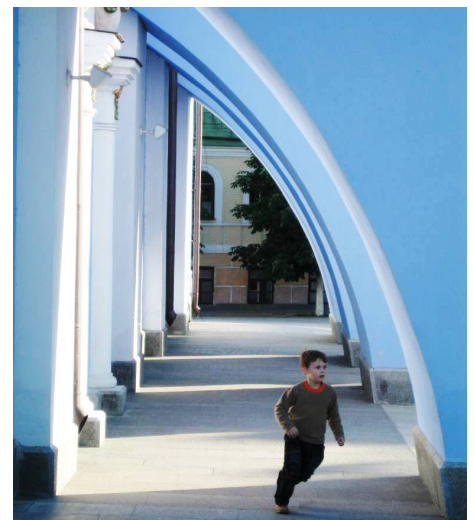
Solutions Focus Tools

The Solutions Focus approach uses a variety of tools that we describe in the following paragraphs. Whilst we show the steps we followed, we emphasise that the approach is a flexible one. You can use the tools at any time, albeit building the platform is normally the first step.

Step 1: Platform Building

At this step, the group has to describe the situation they face. The **Platform** is the point from which they are going to move on. We have groups do this in a number of ways, for example sub groups use "Rich Pictures" or "Modelling" to describe the current situation, discussing their output with the group as a whole. For Richard's workshop we used a technique we call "The Constructive Rant" as we knew the individuals had a need to express their thoughts and feelings.

We invited people to pair up and explained they would have an opportunity to raise issues in a constructive and speedy way. People had three minutes as the speaker to tell the other what annoyed them about working on the team.

The partner had to keep time, remain quiet and listen, asking only "What else?" when the speaker dried up.

After the exercise, the group reconvened and the listener asked the speaker, "So what you really want is...?". They recorded what they really wanted for the team on a card and posted these on a board. The group discussed and clarified these and culled any duplicate

items. Examples included "A shared vision", "cooperation from colleagues" and "recognition of individual skills". This step took around 40 minutes.

Step 2: Shaping the Future -- The "Future Perfect"

At the next step, we had the group develop a vivid description of what the group wanted for the future, using the output from the Platform Building as a catalyst. One way to help teams describe the **Future Perfect** is to use the "Miracle Question." The question flows like this:

"Imagine that tonight, after you have gone to bed and are sound asleep, a miracle happens. The miracle is that all of the issues have disappeared and the team is working perfectly. However, because you were sleeping, you don't know that this miracle has happened.

So when you wake up tomorrow and go to work, what will you see, or feel, or hear, or do that will tell you that everything is so much better? What will other people be saying? What will they be doing?"

Again, small groups can do this in a number of ways and we had the Finance Managers develop a newspaper front page, with headline, lead article and a front page picture. From these front pages we had the whole group develop a detailed description of how they wanted to work and communicate together.

[Tip: Avoid statements like "We are communicating better", or statements that are negative, "We aren't bickering." To counter these

you might ask, *"If you were communicating better, what would you be doing?"* Or, *"If you aren't bickering, what are you doing instead?"]*

Step 3: Small Actions

The output of the Future Perfect step led us very neatly to another step, developing Small Actions. In fact we had planned to use this tool later in the workshop but, as we have found before with Solutions Focus, two steps flowed naturally and we "went with the flow". The purpose of this tool is to ensure that there are actions from the workshop.

A conventional enough approach, but the emphasis is on "Small".

This team, like others we have worked with, has large to do lists, scheduled meetings and sizable e-mail in boxes. They don't need and are unlikely to take sizeable actions. The emphasis is on setting small tasks that people are likely to do.

Future Perfect and Small Actions took around 90 minutes.

Step 4: Counters

The group had a number of actions, but it was apparent that energy was

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low and there was some doubt whether they would achieve these actions. "Counters" is a useful tool you can use at moments like this. Counters (think of them like poker chips) are evidence of things going right, evidence of the Future Perfect happening (even if only on one occasion) and evidence that shows you can achieve the Future Perfect.

We asked the team to list what they had achieved in the last year as evidence of the team working well together. This positive exercise boosted energy and provided the evidence needed.

Step 5: Scaling

Scaling is a very powerful technique. It encourages reflection and discussion and can move a group forward substantially. With the Finance Managers, we scaled their confidence in achieving their Future Perfect.

To scale, we placed 10 flipchart markers on the floor and specified that one end [1] was that they had no confidence in achieving the Future Perfect and that the other end [10] was total confidence in achieving the Future Perfect. Individuals then "scored" their confidence level by standing next to the appropriate marker.

When scaled, we asked each person, "What has brought you this far up the scale?" Note we don't ask, "Why are you down at 1?" [Tip: If they stand at 1 ask them, "What stopped it being zero?"].

Next we asked individuals, "What would it take to move your score one point up the scale?" We got them to be specific and recorded

these points. [Tip: If you find all the actions are for people outside of the group, ask individuals what they would do to move one step up the scale.]

Steps 4 & 5 took around 30 minutes each.

Step 6: Affirming

So often in business, people fail to appreciate others. It is a major complaint we hear in workshops. Affirming is a tool we use to show this appreciation. You can do it in a variety of ways. A simple "thank you" can often suffice. With our Finance Managers we had them give an example of the team working well together during the workshop.

Another technique we have used successfully is to have people circulate and tell others "What I value in you is..." Reserved groups can find this a little harder but it can have a very powerful effect.

Affirming typically takes ten minutes but you can affirm throughout the workshop.

Back at Work

Positive outlook

You can continue the Solutions Focus approach by reviewing what has happened, back at work. At the end of the workshop, give people a task. Ask people to notice what it is that people are doing at work that helps the team to work more effectively. At your next meeting, have them raise any points they identified. Positive Outlook is a way to build Counters at work and can be used to Affirm.

Maintaining Momentum

Another way to build Counters is to ask at any future meeting or workshop, "What's better?" Note the question is not, "Is anything better?" "What's better?" assumes something is better and someone is likely to identify it.

Conclusion

As with Richard's team, we have found Solutions Focus to be a very successful approach to use to help motivate individuals and teams. As one delegate said in feedback: "This was amazingly motivational, a really good way to adjust to a more positive way of thinking." Whilst acknowledging that the problems and concerns people have are valid, Solutions Focus provides an alternative to fruitless analysis of the causes of issues. In addition, it builds an energy and enthusiasm that helps teams succeed. Try it!

References

"Solutions Focus" by Mark McKergow and Paul Z Jackson. Available on Amazon.

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