

INSIGHT GUIDE #9

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can the solution-focused approach help my coaching clients?

In Western culture, it is generally considered both logical and effective to focus on problems and their causes in order to find a solution. The solution-focused approach challenges this mindset; it avoids analysing the problem and instead the coach focuses the coachee on

identifying solutions. Studies have shown that concentrating only on solutions and encouraging individuals to focus on their strengths can enable them to reach their goals in less time than problem-focused approaches.



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What is solution-focused coaching?

Solution-focused coaching, or solution-focused conversations, can help coachees, and employees, by encouraging them to focus on what is possible, rather than the problem they face or the ideas which are outside of their grasp.

Solution-focused coaching may be defined as 'an outcome orientated, competence-based approach' (O'Connell and Palmer, 2008, p278) which encourages employees or coachees to take personal responsibility and focus on future actions to direct these towards a specific goal using their personal strengths to best effect.

This forward approach contrasts with much of what we have been taught. The traditional approach of much of Western modern thought has been to encourage individuals to look back at the past: to focus on understanding the problem and to explore its cause through techniques such as root-cause analysis. This problem orientation thinking is more likely to lead to blame and result in resistance and conflict. Envisioning a solution is much better suited for creating a collaborative environment where any past problem is overcome by the will to reach a common goal.

Where does it come from?

The original idea came from the Milwaukee's Brief Family Therapy Centre and the work of Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and Yvonne Dolan. A group of scientists, working with the counselling team, investigated the art of reducing counselling to the minimum number of sessions through high-intensity sessions. Over the course of about 20 years, the team examined and identified what was especially useful in counselling conversations to help clients reach their goals. This resulted in the development of solution-focused brief counselling, which has claimed from an average of three meetings, each lasting 50 minutes, a success rate of 86%, as shown by studies carried out after 6 and 18 months (de Shazer, 1991).

How does it work?

The basic principle of the solution-focused work is to discuss solutions instead of problems. Once a solution has been identified, the path to reach it can be identified. Grant et al (2012) describe three core facets:

- goal orientation
- problem disengagement
- resource activation

The coach or manager implies – with the usage of the present tense for the solution and the past tense for everything that relates to the problem – that the coachee has already reached the solution and needs 'only' to document the steps and resources needed to reach it.

The coaching mindset

Because the basic principle of the solution-focused approach is to help coachees to identify and design their solutions rather than analyse and solve problems, the mindset of the coach requires:

- being future focused; paying attention to the coachee's notion of how they want their life to be different in the future
- trusting that the coachee is the expert; they are the one who is finding their own best solution
- believing that coachees have strengths and resources, and solutions to their own difficulties; they may not be aware of all of these, so the coach is helping them to discover, like mining for gold
- encouraging small step changes; summed up by the proverb, 'little by little, a little becomes a lot'





Of course it can be cathartic to talk about the problem and important for the coachee, but the skill of the coach is to help coachees move from what can be labelled 'problem island' to 'solution island'. The aim of the coach is to help the coachee tell their story in a way that helps them move towards a solution, by identifying goals, exceptions and resources.

By focusing on the solution and avoiding examining the details of the problem:

- Coaching generally requires fewer sessions.
- Coachees find it easier to work out appropriate solutions. The greater the detail and the more precisely coachees speak of past and future solutions, the more choices they realise are available to them.
- Coachees tend to become more confident to try out solutions. As they imagine and describe their solution, they become motivated and more confident they can achieve it, and as they discuss the resources and abilities they are using to create it, the easier and more realistic it appears.
- The coach helps the coachee, who is the expert, find their home-grown solution. This prevents the coach from being the problem solver or fixer.

Research into solution focus

There has been research into solution-focused approaches (Grant, 2016). One coaching study directly compared the relative effectiveness of solution-focused coaching with problem-focused coaching approaches (Grant and O'Connor, 2010). This found that both coaching approaches were effective at enhancing goal attainment. However, those in the solution-focused group had significantly greater increases in goal attainment compared with the problem-focused group. The problem-focused group did not change the way they felt, whereas the solution-focused approach significantly increased positive effect, decreased negative effect, increased self-efficacy and generated more action steps to help the group members achieve their goal.

Outcome, scaling, know-how and resources, affirm and action, review (OSKAR)

OSKAR is a framework that can be used to structure a solution-focused coaching conversation (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Like GROW, the letters provide a handrail to structure the conversation and help the manager or coach stay on track.

The model incorporates a number of the commonly used tools in a solution-focused approach, including scaling. Other commonly used tools are the miracle question ('If you woke up tomorrow morning and the problem had been solved, what would have happened overnight?') and a focus on the coachee's strengths.

1. Outcome:

- What is the objective of this coaching?
- What do you want to achieve today?
- What does success look like?

2. Scaling:

- On a scale of 0–10, with 0 representing the worst it has ever been and 10 the preferred future, where would you put the situation today?
- You are at *N* now; what did you do to get this far?
- How would you know you had got to *N*+1?

3. Know-how and resources:

- What helps you perform at *N* on the scale, rather than 0?
- When does the outcome already happen for you – even a little bit?
- What did you do to make that happen? How did you do that?

4. Affirm and action:

- What is already going well?
- What is the next small step?
- You are at *N* now; what would it take to get you to *N*+1?
- What else could you do to move to *N*+1?

5. Review:

- What is better?
- What did you do that made the change happen?
- What effects have the changes had?
- What do you think will change?

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



Tracy Barr

Tracy is a Chartered Psychologist and a tutor on the Henley coaching programmes.

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Henley Business School

For more information, please contact:

Henley Business School
Greenlands
Henley-on-Thames
Oxfordshire
RG9 3AU

coaching@henley.ac.uk
Tel +44 (0)1491 418 767
henley.ac.uk/coachingcentre

