

THE SOLUTIONS FOCUS: KEEPING IT SIMPLE IN THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Mark McKergow Published in a German translation by Mag. Sonja Radetz as 'Der Lösungsfokus in der Beratung - Keep it simple', Lernende Organisation (Vienna) No 10 (Nov/Dec 2002), pp 28-33.

"The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes."

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations 129

Introduction

The Solutions Focus (SF) approach has made a great impact in the world of therapeutic change over the past fifteen years. Pioneers including Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg have been instrumental in spreading their ideas and encouraging SF practice in many contexts, including social work (Berg and de Yong, 2001), child protection (Turnell and Edwards, 1999), education (Metcalf 1999, Ajmal & Rees, 2001), and group work (Sharry 2001), amongst others.

The SF approach is now starting to be widely used in organizational settings, and the first books are appearing in English (our own 'The Solutions Focus', Jackson and McKergow 2002) as well as German (Schmitz and Billen, 2000) and Dutch (Cauffman 2001). The SF approach values simplicity in philosophy and language and aims to discover "what works" in a given situation, simply and practically. The focus on solutions (not problems), the future (not the past) and on what's going well (rather than what's gone wrong) leads to a positive and pragmatic way to work with organisations and individuals.

SF is very much part of the systemic tradition. We think it has a distinct flavour, which makes it an interesting addition to the existing repertoire of organizational change approaches. In this article we will explore the key elements of SF and see how they fit alongside other systemic approaches including appreciative inquiry and NLP. We will also give a real case example, and see how the SF approach helped us to find a dramatically effective solution in an industrial setting. Having established an overview of SF ideas, we will then place these alongside two sets of ideas which are closely associated with the Learning Organisation - systems thinking, and language & constructionism. We will see that in both cases, SF offers a route to positive change which is distinctive and simple.

Please note that simple is not the same thing as easy! We will often refer to SF as a simple approach, but to stay simple and not unwittingly to complicate matters is often our challenge.

The Solutions Focus approach - find what works and do more of it

'The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook' William James, American pragmatist philosopher

The SF approach is characterized by a drive for simplicity - but in an unusual way. In the normal run of things, people attempt to simplify complicated situations by trying to find the 'essence' or defining aspect. One might then expect to use this to find a way forwards, perhaps by finding other similar situations with the same 'essence'. Often the essence of the situation is seen in the 'problem', the thing that we are trying to get away from. SF is not like this at all.

Rather than simplifying by looking for commonalities with other cases, each case is simplified on its own, by following William James' advice above and overlooking aspects which are not contributing to existing performance. These could well be different each time, and are developed in conversation with the people involved. This leads us towards a social constructionist description of our work, which we will examine later in this article.

At the highest level, there are three key principles to working in a solutions focused way (de Shazer and Berg, 1995):

1. *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

By 'broke', we mean that somebody in the organization is dissatisfied and wants something to be different. We start to work with the people who want something different and are prepared to do something about it - not the others (who may be ambivalent or who do not see any need for improvement).

2. *Once you know what works, do more of it.*

If you note when the solution is happening already, whether spontaneously, by accident, or even only in part, you have priceless knowledge.

3. *If it's not working, do something different.*

Although we usually make progress by using tenet 2, just occasionally something else is required.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? And it is. But simple is not the same as easy, and we are still surprised by the lure that problem talk holds - for those who want differences in their lives and organizations, and for those whose job it is to help them.

The quest for simplicity

Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem William of Occam, 14th century philosopher

A key aspect distinguishing aspect of SF is simplicity - in terms of philosophy, language, directness and presence. The quest for simplicity has a distinguished history. William of Occam railed against fellow philosophers who were building more and more complicated explanations to account for the circumstances of their world. It appeared that whoever came up with the most complicated was deemed the cleverest and therefore spoke the truth.

He was saying it is vain to assume more in philosophical matters when it is possible to assume less. In his quest to assume no more than he had to, he dissected every issue as if with a razor. Whoever could arrive at the simplest explanation of the world would be making the most progress. The simplest explanation makes as few assumptions as possible, and refrains from postulating 'entities' - things, assumptions, categories, essences - unless there is no possible alternative.

The basis of keeping things as simple as possible is a key tenet of the SF approach. Simplicity shows itself in SF practice by the way we seek to assume as little as possible about the cases we address. To use the three principles above in the most simple way possible means being clear about our explicit assumptions of theory and practice methods, and also our tacit assumptions as in displayed in language and behaviour.

This article will examine the ways that this principle of simplicity is deployed with respect to two main ideas of

learning organizations, and to systemic practice in general - systems theory and language. We will see how the pursuit of imaginary 'essences' can be avoided in practice in a way which is both practical and coherent. But first let us examine and attempt to define SF practice.

Keeping it SIMPLE

'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.' Albert Einstein

An SF practitioner attempts to help clients identify 'what works' so that they can do more of those things, in as simple a way as possible, leading to a 'direct route' to change. Our way of summarising has characterised solutions focused practice by the English word SIMPLE:

- Solutions - not problems
- Inbetween - the action is in the interaction, not the individual
- Make use of what's there - not what isn't
- Possibilities - past, present and future
- Language - simply said
- Every case is different - beware ill-fitting theory

Each of these axioms offers a signpost to the simple route, as well as helping us be aware of excursions which, while they may be interesting and entertaining, may not be necessary. The key lies in keeping things as simple - and SIMPLE - as possible. But no simpler.

To discuss these principles, here is a real case example where a solutions focus made a significant and rapid difference to a real organization:

The chemical site had a problem, and it was looming larger - with a threat of closure from a new safety inspector. The plant had seen plenty of change over the years, with old machinery decommissioned and new processes brought on stream. Safety, which had always been a key issue, was now managed by a plant safety team in conjunction with the safety regulator's site inspector.

The inspector had a great deal of power - he could go wherever he wanted on site, enforce improvement notices (potentially at great expense), and ultimately could stop operations and close down the plant. In the past, working relations with successive inspectors had been reasonable. But now the new inspector was proving uncooperative when presented with the plant team's latest plans to improve the site's safety culture.

The team members had been expecting support from the regulator, and were surprised to find him very officious and correct - wanting to see every piece of paper and reluctant to engage in the customary informal exchanges with managers.

The team tried all the customary good ways of getting along, but to no avail. As stories spread - "You can't get a straight answer out of him..." "He's not interested in anything except the paperwork..." "He's out of his depth, you know..." "He won't stop till he's found something wrong." - a sense of despondency gripped the site.

The safety team knew the essence of the problem: the inspector was stopping them from making progress with their safety culture plans and a worsening impasse would threaten the very future of the site, with appalling knock-on effects for their parent company

Typical ways of approaching this problem might include:

- *An examination of why the inspector wouldn't see sense*
- *A 'barrier analysis' of what was impeding matters*
- *A psychological profile of the inspector, to establish the cause of his behaviour*
- *Attacking the inspector by official complaints to his seniors*
- *A workshop with the inspector to firm up the nature of his concerns*
- *Writing off the time and money invested in the safety culture project and starting again*
- *A systemic analysis of the feedback loops producing the problem*
- *A wide-scale dialoguing exercise with industry and safety representatives*

The safety team brought us in to help, probably expecting us to help them with one of those routes, perhaps suspecting that we would begin by setting up a mediation between them and the inspector.

Instead, we took a solutions focus, asking them to rate their best encounters with him on a scale of 0 - 10. One manager quickly snorted - "Zero!". We paused and waited. "...apart from once, when it was a three for 20 seconds..."

Suddenly there was a glimmer of hope. The crux of the solution, we figured, would be in those few seconds. Not in any of the traditional approaches, and not even requiring conscious action from the inspector. The solution was not going to centre on him as an individual, with all his 'flaws, failings and difficulties', but on the interactions between him and the safety team. We needed to know more.

When we asked the manager what he had done to bring about this dramatic, if brief, improvement, he said "I suppose I stopped pushing him for a moment and gave him time to think."

The mood of the meeting palpably changed. The team outlined the parts they had individually played in their own best exchanges with the inspector, and from these strands drew out a list of 14 actions that they could do quickly, simply and cheaply to move things just one point up the scale.

These included bringing fewer people to meet the inspector, wearing name badges at meetings and giving him more notice of impending questions and issues. The individual who had most contact with the inspector was tasked with noticing what was working best.

Instead of gloom at their lack of options, the managers said they now felt refreshed to be analysing what was going well instead of what was going badly.

When we followed up some weeks later, matters were much improved. The threat of an improvement notice had been lifted, and the project was back on track. One manager said that she knew they were making real progress when the 'impersonal' inspector had enquired about her recent holiday!

The SIMPLE principles in action

'The essence is hidden from us': This is the form our problem now assumes. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations 92

The example above gives us the chance to see how the six SIMPLE principles were enacted in this case, avoiding the temptation of imaginary (hidden) 'essences' along the way:

Solutions, not problems

You can see that the enquiry was based not on how the problem occurred, but on times when it occurred less, or the solution occurred more. Contrast this with the list of possible ways of approaching the problem, most of which are explicitly problem focused. In taking a problem focused stance, we might examine the problem, and then treat the problem as the essence of the situation and use it as the basis for the solution.

Inbetween: The action is in the interaction, not the individual

Our discussions with the managers (themselves interactional, of course) focused not on how come the inspector behaved like he did, or on how come the managers regarded this as a problem. Instead, we asked about the interactions between them - times when they had seen (and been part of) more successful interactions with the inspector. This principle leads us away from talk about imaginary essences 'inside' people (their 'traits' for example) and towards talk about how people act, how they 'do'.

We also sidestep the popular 'essence' that is described as the 'cause' of the problem. By addressing the interaction, we avoid focus on which side is the cause, or who is to blame. We will address this in the discussion on systemic approaches below.

Make use of what is there - not what isn't

We could have started to inquire about things that were not 'there' - things that were not happening, deficits in any of the parties. Instead we asked about what was there - the times when things had happened a little better. Talk about things that are not there seems rather strange to us - because by talking about it, it is in some way present. By discussing what is there, we seek to avoid the complication of talking about what is not there - and is so 'hidden'.

Possibilities - past, present and future

While the idea of possibilities in the future is everyday, the idea of possibilities in the past is rather a strange one. However, it is illustrated very well here. Despite the fact that the managers thought their situation so stuck that they called in consultants, we started by looking for possibilities in the past - times when despite everything there was evidence that the situation was changing and changeable. If we were problem focused, we could have assumed that the past was a source of indication of the 'cause' of the problem - but we did not. Another hidden 'essence' avoided here is the active discussion (and hence possible construction) of 'barriers to change'. We are usually more interested in what will make it easy, not what will make it difficult!

Language - simply said

We like to keep discussion towards small everyday words. We note that words used to talk about hidden essences are usually large and complicated, perhaps due to the difficulty of distinguishing other abstract words by any other means. Large abstract words can lead to reification (itself a large abstract word!), and mistaking labels for 'things' in the world. Small words may appear mundane and simple, but they seem to be helpful in describing the situation in an everyday way. There will be more discussion of language below.

Every case is different - beware ill-fitting theory

There are many ideas about how people should get along at work. We could have arrived with one of these ideas in our bag and deployed it. But by doing SF we simply asked about things that helped in this case and encouraged the people to do more of that. That works (as it usually does) in this case, but is not immediately transferable to other cases. This takes us back to the distinction between problem and solution: To find a solution from a problem, we need some way to connect the two - a theory. If we eschew the temptation of the problem and focus simply on finding what works and doing more of it, no theory is required other than the truism 'What works is what works'.

[Systemic approaches to a 'Learning Organisation'](#)

Most of the literature on 'learning organisations' stresses the importance of systems thinking. (The one odd exception seems to be Harvard don David Garvin's assertion that 'organisational learning is a matter of error detection and correction' (see for example Garvin, 2000). More thoughtful approaches have taken a systemic view, often rooted in Chris Argyris's version (for example Argyris and Schon, 1978 and subsequent publications) of Gregory Bateson's (1971) ideas about first and second-level learning.

First level learning is seen as change 'within' a system, while change 'to' the system is seen second level learning. These are different 'types' of change - no amount of change within a system can bring about the same effect as a change to the system itself. These ideas also appear in the work of Bateson's research team including Paul Watzlawick and John Weakland (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974), itself an important precursor to SF practice.

The systems tradition in organizational learning has also been strongly influenced by Peter Senge in his 'Fifth Discipline' series (Senge, 1990 and 1994). Senge's approach is rooted in system dynamics, and his books feature system diagrams illustrating the effects and combinations of positive and negative feedback, time delays and so on. While these books have been very popular, we suspect that their influence has been less than Senge had hoped. Indeed, in his address to the First World Conference on Systemic Management (organized by ISCT in Vienna in 2001), Senge admitted that his desire to see managers as 'system designers', making carefully planned changes to the systemic interactions around them by using system design tools, had proved unfeasible.

We think that one reason for this is that the very act of attempting to reduce the complexity and richness of the world to a system diagram is an act of unhelpful simplification. To seek the hidden 'essence' of the underlying system is, to us, to risk eliminating from consideration important exceptions and counterexamples - times when things do not behave just like the idealized 'system'. Talk about systems (itself not an important part of SF practice) could be mistaken for acting systemically: enacting and promoting interactions which are part of making progress (a crucial part of SF practice).

Emergent systems

A different and interesting tradition in systems thinking has appeared over the past ten years - emergent systems. It can easily be shown that computerized 'agents' following simple rules can, by their interaction, produce large-scale coherent behavior which cannot be predicted from analysis of the rules alone. The study of such 'complex systems' has revealed insights into the ways in which traffic jams form on a motorway, or birds flock (see for example Stewart and Cohen 1994 and Waldrop 1993).

One interesting property of emergent systems is that they are impossible to predict in detail - even if trends can be recognized. This, it transpires, is due to their mathematical properties rather than any shortcoming in computing technology. Nonetheless, these systems can exhibit behaviour which appears to be coherent and analyzable. Stewart and Cohen have coined an interesting term for a complex system which, in its interactions, appears to generate simple behaviour - 'complicity'. The overall results of a complex interacting system may then be said to be 'complicit' - all the elements of the system can be seen as making some kind of contribution.

To inquire about which element of a complicity is 'causing' some state of affairs is, then, a nonsensical question. All the elements contribute. And the corollary of this is that any of them can, in principle, do something to start to change it. We find this a very empowering thought when working with organizations. The SF approach is much more in the tradition of emergent systems than system dynamics - we find ourselves working in a complicit way with the organisation's people to find emerging examples of the solution happening already, and build on these, rather than attempting to design a 'better world' - an undertaking doomed, we think, to theoretical as well as practical failure.

Language approaches to a 'Learning Organisation'

This journal is characterized by a commitment to constructionist approaches. We would like to take a lead from Steve de Shazer (de Shazer, 1994), and position SF practice in the context of two important traditions of construction - structuralism and post-structuralism.

In the structuralist view of language, from Saussure onwards, the main idea is that language consists of units (the words or phonemes) and the rules by which these are put together (the grammar). Structuralist inquiry centres on the ways in which the large-scale meaning is built up from words using structure. This idea was taken forward, notably by Noam Chomsky in his 'Transformational Grammar'. In a spoken (or written) sentence, the 'surface structure' is connected to a 'deep structure' from which meaning is derived. This approach has led to modern change approaches including neurolinguistic programming (NLP), which is explicitly based on Chomsky's work (Bandler and Grinder 1975) in terms of attempting to discover the 'deep structure' of what is being said. The surface structure stands for a deeper (and hidden) meaning, which if discovered will lead to change. Patterns of language are investigated under headings of 'deletion, distortions and generalisations', being the three ways in which the surface structure misrepresents the deep and underlying meaning.

Solution Focused practice follows a different linguistic tradition, post-structuralism. Very briefly this can be seen as starting with Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language games. A word has no ultimate meaning outside its use - and each time it is used it is open to new meanings. The meaning of a statement, then, is not found by looking under or behind it for some hidden element. It is to be found in the interaction of the listener and the speaker, or the reader and the text. Then, in Wittgenstein's words,

'everything lies open to view' (Philosophical Investigations 126). Nothing is hidden, and meaning is constructed out in the open, inbetween.

Social Constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry

'Language enters life through concrete utterances, and life enters language through concrete utterances as well.' Mikhail Bakhtin

An important strand in recent post-structural development is 'social constructionism', in which the ideas of meaning being constructed 'inbetween' are explored. Key writers in the field include Ken Gergen (see for example Gergen, 1999) and Sheila MacNamee (MacNamee and Gergen, 1998). The organizational approach of Appreciative Inquiry (see for example Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001) has also developed from these ideas. Appreciative Inquiry is probably the closest organizational change model to SF. The similarities are legion - for example the focus on generating conversations about things that are going well, a broadly optimistic stance, the contextual view of 'meaning', and the value of affirming. Yet it seems to me that there are differences too. I do not wish to make these appear large, but the two traditions have emerged from different starting points to very similar positions, and there may well be useful things for practitioners to learn from each other. One possible difference may lie in SF's striving for simplicity and minimalism, with one hand on Occam's Razor, and an eye fixed firmly on the visible, open construction in progress.

It is tempting to think that social construction is a special kind of activity - one which may require new ways of talking, dialogue, interchange. Interesting efforts are being made to find ways forward in this arena (for example McNamee and Gergen, 1998). But if we are to take the idea of social constructionism seriously, we must surely acknowledge that people are co-constructing all day, every day. We all know, in some sense, how to do this, as we do it all the time. SF seems to me to often appear mundane - it does not require a 'different' or special kind of talk to succeed. People are constructing all kinds of great things between them - perhaps we can help by collaborating and drawing attention to the ways they do it?

Micro-construction

'You cannot step into the same river twice' - Heraclitus

*'You cannot step into the same **pond** twice'* - Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen (1999)

The quote above by Heraclitus is very well known and widely used. The implication - that you cannot step into the same river twice because the water has changed in the meantime - is widely used to draw attention to the changing nature of the world. Stewart and Cohen's version, however, goes even further. They point out that it is impossible to step into the same pond twice - as even if the water has not changed, you have. This nicely reflects the micro-level of construction that SF practitioners routinely explore. We find it useful to pay attention to the ways in which conversations are played out, one move at a time, with each move altering the context for the next. One aspect of SF practice is that we often use a small range of questions as starting points. Sometimes people ask me 'How can you bear to go on asking the same questions over and over?' My reply is that each time you ask the 'same' question, it's a different question. Even if it is in the same interview with the same clients. What matters, of course, is not just the question, but the answers and the directions they help us to take together. Conversations may seem to be about the future or the past, but we should keep sight of their existence here and now in the present, where everything lies open to view. This seems to hark back to the idea of emergent systems above - we construct the world, and change it, a step at a time. So SF is a practice of conversation and action - often quite short conversations, discussion of small actions and then seeing what happens that shows progress.

I hope that this article helps you to enhance your ideas about solutions focused practice. By positioning SF alongside the various different traditions and schools relating to learning organizations, you may see how this simple and minimal approach is at the same time subtle and direct. By working with what already works, allowing systemic and linguistic mechanisms to do their things, we can seek to act to amplify and build positive change. It is an interesting way to go on together.